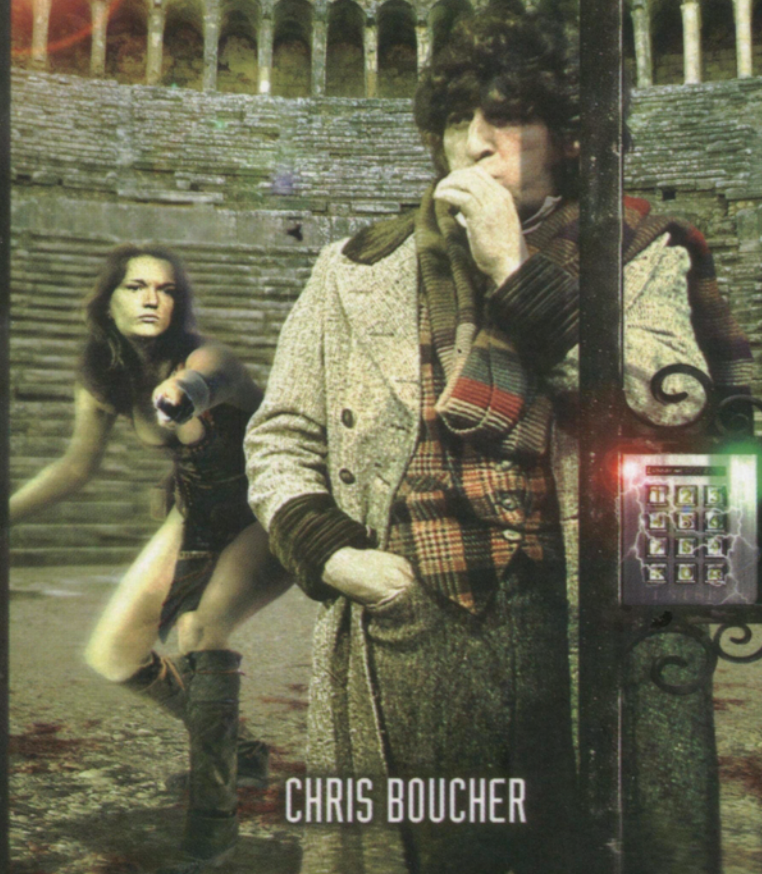


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BOOKS

DOCTOR WHO

MATCH OF THE DAY



CHRIS BOUCHER



There were the contracts, the agents, the local sponsors, the broadcasts, the laws which made murder legal...

It had taken a long time to establish, and even longer to develop the league of superstar duellists. And just when it was all working so well, someone or something started interfering. Famous fighters died in private duels. Up-and-coming professionals fell to casual, one-time challengers.

When Leela is challenged to a duel to the death, the Doctor realises that there is more to the situation than simple murder and mayhem. But before he can sort it out, he needs to save his new client – Leela. How long can she survive on a planet where *not* to kill is an offence punishable by death?

This adventure features the Fourth Doctor and Leela

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DOCTOR WHO

MATCH OF THE DAY

CHRIS BOUCHER



DOCTOR WHO:
MATCH OF THE DAY

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For Lynda

Chapter One

As the Mythmotor Repro dropped down off the elevated section onto the twelve-lane drag, Keefer touched the hidden switch on the control board and killed the inboard link. He accelerated carefully, simulating the response of the computer overrides, and enjoyed the sensation of being in total control of the runner. So what if it was illegal? He had a right to protect himself according to his contract: 'in any way not prejudicial to the lives of non- participants.' Non-participants, yeah that'd be right. He shuddered slightly as he thought of the chancers, three so far, who'd tried to take him down. No declaration, just step up and shoot for it. Breach of contract? Pity about that. They'd still make a liftload of money. And he'd still be dead as yesterday.

He pushed his speed up to the legal limit and was comforted by the knowledge of the extra power waiting in the modified drive. 'You and me,' he said aloud to the vehicle, 'the scufflers can't touch you and me.'

And then Keefer saw him. Four, maybe five hundred metres ahead, a slim figure standing motionless on the shoulder of the road. Even at that distance he could see the long gun clearly. For a moment he froze while the runner rushed him on towards the assassin. He thought he saw a flash as the laser sight probed for a head shot. He'd imagined it probably, but it was enough to snap him out of his death trance. He angled the runner across the lanes towards the shoulder.

'Not too fast,' he whispered, 'don't spook him.' Beyond terror now, Keefer was filled with an icy elation. 'Take your time friend,' he said. 'You know the traffic computer's got me trapped. Wait for the perfect shot... Wait.'

With fifty metres to go Keefer yelled his triumph: 'Too late you scuffer!' and slammed his foot on the accelerator. The drive howled with power. Keeping his foot on the accelerator,

Keefer turned the wheel hard towards the shoulder. The tyres screamed as the runner began to slide. As the rear slewed round he hit the brakes. The runner rolled. It heaved from the road, turning slowly in the air. Too late the assassin pulled the trigger of the gun and high-velocity bullets spewed through the floor. The last thing the shooter must have seen was the underside of the old Mythmotor as, wheels still spinning, it crashed down towards him. For one aching moment it seemed to hang in the air; then with ponderous grace it landed squarely on its wheels, flattening him into the motorway.

Keefer released the safety casing, unlocked the runner door and stepped out. The elation had gone, as it always did, and he was left frightened and angry. 'Murderous scuffler,' he whispered, forcing the words through a dry, constricted throat. 'You're supposed to notify a contract. I'm supposed to know you're coming. Neither of us earn like this, you stupid amateur scuffwit.'

Reaction was making his legs weak, so he walked to the verge and sat down heavily. On the motorway vehicles continued without pause. None of the passing witnesses interrupted their travel programming to stop or to report what they had seen, assuming that the Central Traffic Computer would be responding. Since it had not been controlling his runner, however, the computer had registered neither breakdown nor accident. Keefer was on his own.

The unthinking acceptance of the control computers' power to deal with routine problems and dangers was one of the things that made society safe and well adjusted. It was also what made contract duellists like Keefer rich and famous. At least, the Prime Division were rich and famous. Men like Starvil, Maidenly and Cordell, and perhaps most famous of all, the woman, Coodar.

Keefer was not yet Prime Division. But he would be, he was confident of that. He had a talent for survival and an instinct for the spectacular counterattack. It made him good copy and a crowd-pleaser in a contract duel when the tri-dee cameras could cover an agreed killing ground. Indeed, as his nerves

settled, Keefer's anger that this coup had been undeclared only increased. If the remote tri-dee cameras had recorded it there was no question that it would have been shown planet-wide and there was a strong possibility that it would have made the full interplanetary network. It could have been the breakthrough into Prime Division that he had waited for. He cursed the assassin again. 'Scuffling scuffwit, I'd have taken your contract. You didn't have to short-cut. I'm not that expensive.'

He got to his feet and moved back to the runner. Now all he'd get out of it was some local publicity. If his agent did a little fast promoting they might make the mid-evening newscast and the next fax-sheet issue. He dialled up Jerro Fanson's private number on the remote-call.

'Rational intelligence,' said the Doctor, tapping dubiously on one of the control console's transdimensional flux relay indicators, 'is based on the capacity to remember.' The indicator continued to blink intermittently and the TARDIS continued drawing supplementary power from the less predictable zero point energy flux.

Leela yawned and stretched. 'You have told me that,' she said. 'You have told me more than once that rational intelligence is based on the capacity to remember.'

'I have?' The Doctor was not really listening. 'I must have forgotten.' He tapped the indicator again. Was the TARDIS really losing stability and developing a dangerously random half-dimensional drag, or was he looking at a faulty indicator and imagining the rest?

'Knowledge that is not based on memory,' Leela parroted, 'is instinct which is a matter of evolution. Training is not the same as instinct although it looks the same.' She pulled the hunting knife she always carried from the sheath on the belt of her tunic and offered it to the Doctor. 'You have also said: when in doubt hit it with something heavy.'

The Doctor ran a hand through his unruly curls and smiled his vivid, wolfish smile. 'That was a joke,' he said. 'On the other hand so is this.' He took the knife and hit the relay

indicator with it. The indicator continued to blink. 'Last time I was on Earth,' he said, 'or maybe it was the time before that... well whenever it was, I came across an interesting puzzle.' He hit the indicator again; harder this time. Nothing changed. 'A watch - that's a small mechanical device for matching the passage of time against the movement of the planet and indicating it on a dial - was running fast and so never showed the correct planetary time. Whereas a broken watch that wasn't running at all actually showed the correct time once every twelve hours.' He hit the indicator harder still. 'So which watch was better? The constantly inaccurate one, or the occasionally correct one?' He hit the indicator again and it stopped blinking and went off altogether. The Doctor stopped smiling and frowned. 'And which is this do we think?'

Leela was getting used to the Doctor's habit of teasing and of using games to test her. She thought for a moment then said, 'There is no answer to this puzzle. Both the devices are useless unless you know the correct measurement of time to begin with. And if you know the correct measurement of time to begin with both devices are useless.'

The Doctor nodded appreciatively. 'That's very clever,' he said. 'Rather too logical for someone who insists on carrying something like this about with them.' He handed the knife back to her.

'You have told me that before too,' Leela said, sheathing the knife with a small flourish and adjusting the tunic belt so that the knife rested comfortably against her left thigh.

'So memory is necessary for rational intelligence,' the Doctor said. 'But it doesn't guarantee it.' He smiled as he spoke but that did not make the comment any less cutting.

When his agent, Jerro Fanson, eventually came on the line Keefer said without preamble, 'Jer, I've just taken a non-contract hit. Chancer on the motorway with a high-velocity long gun.'

On the small viewscreen Fanson's chubby face frowned with concern. 'You all right?'

‘He blew a few holes in the floor of my runner.’

‘The floor?’

‘I bounced on him.’

Fanson grinned. ‘Gaudy kid. Very gaudy.’

Keefer didn’t smile. For all that Fanson was his agent and Keefer liked him, he was an outsider to this. What had happened between the attacker and Keefer linked them in some way that Keefer himself did not understand. It was as though they shared some secret, some guilty secret that they could have admitted only to each other. With a genuine pro’ the link would have been stronger, but Fanson’s admiration was an intrusion even when the opponent had broken all the rules.

‘It’s messy enough to get us some good coverage,’ said Keefer, ‘if you stir up your contacts.’

Fanson shrugged unhappily. ‘I’ll try kid, but I doubt we’ll rate a mention tonight. Starvil took a spot challenge about two hours ago. And lost.’

‘He’s dead?’

‘As last hour’s news.’

‘How?’

‘Open field garrotte. It was all over in five minutes. Starvil went down like a stumbling amateur.’

‘I don’t believe it,’ said Keefer. ‘Starvil was the best. Open field was his speciality.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ said Fanson, looking gloomy. ‘Hand, knife, garrotte, no one could touch him. Only somebody did. His agent’s screaming foul and trying to hit the Guild insurance fund. He’s got no chance. It was a private challenge but it was legal, notified and legal.’

‘Forget his agent!’ Keefer snapped. ‘Who was it took Starvil?’

Fanson looked hurt. ‘His agent’s bleeding kid and why not? He had a lot invested.’

‘Who was it?’

‘Nobody knows. It was an anonymous notification. I reckon it was Coodar. She and Starvil had a thing going for a while.’ He shrugged. ‘They fell out.’

Keefer shook his head. 'You don't waste a Prime target like Starvil without earning.'

'That's what his agent says. Where are you? I'd better get on it if we're going to make the newscast.'

Keefer glanced round. 'R4 southbound, junction 4 by 12. I shouldn't bother though.'

'There may be an angle.'

For the first time Keefer smiled. 'You're a good agent Jer, but you're not that good.'

'A Hit and a Miss in the Afternoon of Death,' intoned Fanson. 'It has possibilities.'

'It stinks,' said Keefer, still smiling.

'That's why it has possibilities,' his agent said and broke the connection.

While he waited for the tri-dee recording unit, Keefer moved round the runner checking the possible camera angles with the practised eye of the professional performer. Finally he bent down to peer at the shattered remains of his would-be assassin. Only now that his nerves had steadied and the practical demands of his trade were uppermost in his mind could he bring himself to examine the man he had killed. As he stared at the corpse it took Keefer several seconds to register that what he was looking at was not a man at all.

Leela retied the leather threads at the tip of the knife sheath round her leg just above the knee. 'You have lost control of the TARDIS again,' she remarked as she checked the contents of the combat pouch she also carried on the belt of her hide tunic. Whetstone, blood-staunch patch, energy chew-stick, painkilling herbs and hair comb - yes they were all there. 'That is why.'

'That is why what?' the Doctor demanded, though he knew perfectly well what his bright and irritatingly observant young companion was about to say.

'That is why you are angry with me.'

'I'm not angry with you,' he said, his face a study of patient irritation. 'Nor have I lost control of the TARDIS.'

Leela said, 'You were not pleased when the flickering light went out.'

'It went out without explanation.'

'You hit it,' Leela said reasonably.

The TARDIS whispered to itself and wheezed a little, like a heavy sleeper stirring from a dream. The random drag seemed to the Doctor to have become a less random and more definite drag. It felt to him as though the half-dimensionality was filling and the TARDIS was struggling to create a place for itself, and for them, in a continuum where they had no previous and future existence. At these moments there was always and forever so much adjustment to be made, so many discontinuities to be cauterised, so many causal links to be jury-rigged and patched. An infinity of previous and future interactions had to be unpicked and reweaved in less than the shadow of an instant. But this was happening much too quickly. This was underpowered. This was going to be uncomfortably lumpy.

Jerro Fanson lit a rolled smoke, rehearsed a couple of confident smiles, then keyed the number of the Zone Three Sports Desk. Michaelson was on duty. 'Mickey! Good to see you,' said Fanson, flashing the better of his two smiles.

Michaelson's thin face smiled back. 'Hello Jerro.'

A promising start: Michaelson wasn't known as Miserable Mickey for nothing. 'Got something good, Mickey. Wanted to give you first crack.'

'Generous of you.'

'You know me Mickey, all heart.'

Michaelson scowled suddenly. 'A giant-hearted carrion eater. What is it you want to sell me Fanson? Your boy Keefer?'

'You make him sound like a fistful of slime,' said Fanson, with more than a touch of genuine anger. 'Let me tell you something -'

'No!' snapped Michaelson. 'Let me tell *you* something. I liked Keefer, as much as you can like any of them. He was a

natural. And he had guts. He would have made Prime sooner or later.'

'What do you mean would have done?!'

Michaelson stared out of the screen for a long moment. 'You mean you don't know?'

'Don't know what?' yelled Fanson. 'I don't know what you're talking about. That I don't know!'

'Reefer's dead.'

'Dead? When? Where?'

'Fifteen, twenty minutes ago. On the motorway.' He paused to punch the retrieval sequence on a small display unit. 'Yeah here it is. R4 southbound, junction 4 by 12. Head shot, high-velocity long gun. Spot challenge, notified and accepted an hour before.'

Fanson relaxed and smiled. 'For a minute there I thought you were serious. When did you take up practical jokes Mickey?'

'It's on the computer, Jerro. Notification, place, result. I'm sorry man, I assumed you knew.' Michaelson gave a slight shrug of embarrassment. 'I thought that's what you were trying to sell me.'

'It was,' said Fanson.

'I knew it!' Michaelson raged. 'You scuffling parasite!'

'Now wait a minute, Mickey.'

'Don't Mickey me, Fanson. You just blew every connection with Zone Three. You're out, man!'

Before Michaelson could hit the disconnect switch Fanson keyed the emergency jammer. The picture went hazy for a moment then cleared. 'Now you listen to me Michaelson. No scrawny little staffer tells me what connections I do or don't have with Zone Three or any other company! Do you hear me Michaelson?'

Michaelson smiled sourly. 'I hear you,' he said softly. 'I hope it was worth the fine. Or is this really an emergency?'

'It is for you! Somebody's screwing up your data input. Keefer's alive!'

'Are you saying it didn't happen?'

‘Oh it happened all right,’ said Fanson, his temper subsiding.

Michaelson looked back at his display unit. ‘R4 southbound, junction 4 by 12?’

‘Right,’ said Fanson.

‘High-velocity long gun?’

Fanson nodded slowly. ‘Right. But there was no spot challenge.’

Michaelson spoke quietly as though suddenly afraid of being overheard: ‘Come on the notification is here. According to this you accepted it an hour before the kill.’

‘That’s crud!’ snapped Fanson. ‘Are you calling me a liar? It was a chancer! He tried for it. Keefer killed him.’

The two men stared at each other for a long moment. For each, the sincerity of the other was obvious and unnerving. Michaelson broke the silence. ‘What’s going on Jerro?’ he said very softly.

The TARDIS shuddered, smoothed out the shudder so that it was an unshudder, and then shuddered again.

‘I think it might be a good idea,’ the Doctor said, ‘to hold onto something.’

He reached for the main console and, as soon as he touched it, felt a sub-gravity ripple tingle through his fingers and scratch at the back of his eyes. Giddiness pushed at him. Before Leela could make the same mistake he swatted her hand away. ‘Better still,’ he grunted, ‘I should sit down if I were you.’ He slumped to the floor and hunched up clutching his knees to his chest. ‘Like this.’ He closed his eyes against the heaving whirls.

Leela knew better than to argue with the Doctor at such times. She dropped to her knees and braced her hands on the floor on either side of her. ‘Will we be damaged?’ she asked, raising her voice above the pulsed howling of the control console. There was a long lurch that had ended before it began and began before it had ended, and it felt to Leela as though she would fall and if she fell she would fall forever.

'Come on Jer, come on.' Keefer punched the urgent button on the remote but Fanson's number continued to reject his signal. He cancelled the call and leaned against the runner to think it out. Somebody wanted him dead. Not to earn or to break into the professional rankings but just to have him dead, just to have him cease to exist. An android programmed to kill wasn't an opponent, it was an executioner. Somebody had sent a robot executioner. And then the full realisation hit him. 'It's yesterday,' he muttered. 'It's over, I'm as good as dead.'

Ownership of an android was rare enough, but someone who could get one that would kill his unknown enemy must carry enough clout to be on first-name terms with all the gods. It wasn't just money, although it would take rather more of that than Keefer could earn in several lifetimes as top number in the Prime Division. No, it was more than that. It was power. The power to have it done, whatever it was, without the suggestion of a question. There were maybe two people in all the settled planets with the sort of power it would take to have an android adapted to kill. And when whichever one it was knew the thing had missed, what then? If power like that wanted him dead then he *was* dead.

The sound of an approaching jet-copter brought Keefer back to life. Perhaps they already knew. The icy calm that always came with combat cleared Keefer's mind of everything but the instinct to survive. He leaned into the runner and took the weapons belt from the safety compartment. He clipped on the belt, thumbed an incendiary pellet from one of the holders and dropped it on the runner's back seat just above the fuel-tank housing. The jet-copter was closing fast. Keefer sprinted for the cover of the bank that bordered the road.

On the back seat of the runner the pellet reacted to the moisture in the air and started to burn. As it got hotter it began to melt through the structure and drop towards the fuel tank.

Keefer slogged up the bank and flung himself down on the other side. The only real cover was a small clump of trees

about three hundred metres from where he lay. If he tried for it the occupants of the 'copter would be bound to spot him. His instinct told him that would be very bad news. Carefully he peered over the top of the bank as the 'copter screamed in, balanced its jets and hovered over the runner. It was a gun-ship. It opened fire just about the moment when the white-hot incendiary pellet burned through the top of the old Mythmotor's fuel tank.

Keefer ducked back as the runner exploded, hurling flame and metal upwards like a burning fist. The gun-ship pilot missed his cue by a full beat. As he kicked the jets wide and the 'copter lunged skywards it was already too late. Flame roared through the vents and the gun ports. Ammunition and fuel erupted scattering debris and fire across the motorway. Before the last pieces hit the ground Keefer was up and running for the trees.

On the motorway the Central Traffic Computer stopped every vehicle within a mile in either direction. As he reached cover Keefer heard the sirens of the emergency services converging on the killing ground.

Most of the Zone Three mid-evening newscast was devoted to an obituary of Starvil taken straight and unedited from the interplanetary network. Considering the short notice it was a good solid presentation. A brief biography was followed by reruns of his best kills and a nicely restrained eulogy by one of the more dignified network frontmen. If the actual details of his death were a little sketchy it was surely understandable since it had happened without benefit of tri-dee coverage.

After the network linkup, Zone Three's local news carried, amongst other things, a brief item about an accident on the R4 southbound in which three people were killed. Keefer was not mentioned, in fact no names were given at all. This could have been an editorial foul-up, since at the time Zone Three had a small drama of its own.

On the very night when the main news story was the death of a legendary sports personality, the duty sports editor, one

Jon 'Mickey' Michaelson, was found dead. Within three hours of the discovery of the body, Jerro Fanson, an independent promotions agent with a reputation as a hustler, had been arrested and charged with his murder.

Leela clenched her teeth and closed her eyes but the sudden silence made her open them again immediately. The Doctor was standing peering down at her. 'Did you sleep well?' he asked.

'I was asleep?'

'Yes.' The Doctor smiled encouragingly. 'You were snoring.'

'How long?'

'How long were you snoring?'

'How long was I sleeping?' She stood up easily and without any sign of the stiffness she might have expected from falling asleep on her knees on a hard floor.

The Doctor pulled his battered hat from the pocket of his long coat and jammed it on his head. 'That depends on which watch you think is more reliable.'

'I do not think I was asleep,' Leela said.

'Are you sure?' the Doctor said. 'It can be hard to tell, some dreams are very vivid.' He headed for the door. 'Shall we go? Yes I think so.' And without saying anything else he was gone.

Leela noticed that, as had happened before, he made almost no effort to check on what might be waiting outside the TARDIS. She tried to see if anything was showing up on the screen above the door but the only movement she could make out was the Doctor wandering forward into who-knows-what danger. She tightened the strings on her hide boots. 'Wait for me,' she called as she set out after him.

Chapter Two

The Doctor looked around at the concrete culvert and found himself wondering why it was that the TARDIS seemed to favour materialising in unobtrusive alleyways in industrial complexes, obscure corners of underground labyrinths, half-hidden woodland copses, or anywhere really that was not immediately identifiable. Perhaps it was easier for her to slip in unobserved. Or perhaps such anonymous places had fewer existential links to be severed and temporal resonances to be tuned out. ‘Or of course,’ he said aloud, ‘it could simply be a coincidence, a matter of statistical probability. It could be what most places in most worlds are like.’ He strolled on through what he assumed was a service duct of some sort, regretting vaguely that he had skipped the class in transdimensional locus attraction dynamics in favour of the theory and practice of yo-yos and juggling for beginners. ‘The trouble with juggling is that you forget how to do it,’ he said. ‘It’s not at all like riding a bicycle.’

Leela trotted up beside him. ‘Doctor? Why did you not wait for me?’

‘I did wait for you.’ The Doctor did not break his stride. ‘I am waiting for you. Try to keep up, there’s a good girl.’

‘You were talking to yourself,’ Leela said.

The Doctor shrugged. ‘Everyone talks to themselves.’

Leela shook her head emphatically. ‘I do not talk to myself. Warriors do not talk to themselves.’

‘They just don’t do it out loud,’ the Doctor said smiling, but he was abruptly aware that the lumpy landing had left him more disorientated than he had realised. He hoped the TARDIS was recovering more quickly than he was himself. He wanted her to be ready. He didn’t intend to spend very much time here, wherever here was, in fact he wasn’t really sure why he was bothering to explore at all. It was probably worth

finding out where they were though. It seemed pointless to suffer a lumpy landing without having anything to show for it except lumps. And there might still turn out to be a reasonable reason to be here. Of course a reason is not the same as a purpose, as he had to keep explaining to the hopelessly purposeful... it was a shame that people kept looking for purposes when they should be looking for reasons... the point was you could make up a purpose to suit any particular insanity but a reason existed and had to be found...

Leela interrupted his chaotic musings. 'What is this place and why are we here?' she asked reasonably.

The Doctor glanced back to where the TARDIS was already partially hidden by a buttress, a heavy angular support that ran from the base of the culvert, across the top, and back down to the base again. 'Yes,' he said vaguely.

'Yes what?'

'What?'

'What is this place and why are we here?' Leela repeated. It was a challenge more than a question now.

'I should have brought a ball of thread; the Doctor mused. 'Or a bag of breadcrumbs.'

Leela said, 'I do not understand.'

'Neither do I,' the Doctor agreed. 'Devising a way of finding the homing device shouldn't be beyond the wit of a Time Lord. I wonder if that's another training course I missed? Routine TARDIS locator location.' He turned back and walked on with renewed determination. 'Keep an eye open for identifying features we may need to find our way back in a hurry.'

Leela touched the hilt of her knife. 'You think this place is dangerous.' She strode along beside the Doctor, her gait easy and relaxed, only the brief touch to the knife hilt betraying her tension.

'I think this place is anonymous,' the Doctor said. The channel was sloping slightly downwards and bending gently to the left, and they were approaching another buttress. He noticed for the first time that they gave off a faint, slightly

luminous glow. 'One whatever-this-is looks much like another whatever-this-is.'

'Now you are being silly,' Leela said lengthening her stride and beginning to move ahead of the Doctor.

He made no attempt to keep up with her, pausing instead to look more closely at the surface of the buttress. 'Am I being silly?' he asked of no one in particular. 'Yes, I think I probably am.' Leela was disappearing round the bend ahead. 'As it happens I don't think this is a culvert,' he called after her. 'Or a storm drain. You don't bother to light culverts or storm drains. Not even with a chemically reactive paint... or a bioluminescent coating, it could be a bioluminescent coating. If it is bioluminescent, the question becomes: is it naturally occurring or is it deliberately engineered?' He rubbed the surface with his finger. It was slightly warm to the touch, suggesting it wasn't bioluminescence. 'And the other question becomes why am I dithering about here talking to myself? Why don't I just get on with it? What am I afraid of? That's three questions. Why can't I count properly? That's four questions. I think that's four questions.'

He closed his eyes for a moment and concentrated on what had happened in the TARDIS an infinite sometime briefly ago. It was as though his other incarnations before and after, the once and future Doctors, had fringed and multiplied, overlapping and leaving him not quite jumbled and almost confused. There was still no place for him now. He should not be here. That was it. This was not his here and now. This was still not his here and now. He waited, trying not to concentrate. He concentrated, trying not to wait. And then it was done and he was himself again. He felt it all focus and slot together, and he knew he belonged where he was. He shivered and opened his eyes and was himself and only himself again. He wasted no more time and set out after Leela. It's an alleyway, he thought, or possibly a corridor in a building of some sort. He walked on quickly, bothered that he had let his travelling companion get so far ahead. Being an aggressive young primitive she was bound to get into trouble, it was one of her more reliable traits.

Before long he reached the point in the bend where he could see the light at the end of whatever it was, a tunnel perhaps? If it was a tunnel that would make it the light at the end of the tunnel that he could see. It didn't look like an oncoming train of any sort, it looked a lot like daylight. And he could see what looked like sand in the daylight. What he could not see was any sign of Leela. A tunnel leading to some sort of sandy terrain: surely the TARDIS hadn't brought them to another storm mine. There were occasions, too many occasions recently, when the old thing went back over new ground, or forward over old ground, constantly round and round as though obsessed. It tended to get diverted into the backwash of minor temporal anomalies far more often than used to be the case. It was getting predictable, unoriginal even: been there, done that, got the hat and scarf... The options analysis switching loops were probably fogged with partially rejected parallels. The opening balances needed resetting: another of the training courses he'd skipped. The way things were going, or rather the way things weren't going, most of the TARDIS needed an overhaul up to and including the police box paintwork. What a dull prospect, he thought, and how very fortunate it was that he had neglected to learn how to do any of the required procedures, after all who was it who said: show me a perfect house and I'll show you a wasted life? He smiled to himself and said aloud, 'So show me a perfect TARDIS, and I'll show you a wasted incarnation.'

He strode on and, approaching the shadow framed brightness, he could see now that he wasn't in the open ore-scoop of a storm mine. The TARDIS hadn't brought them back to a tangle of interrupted universes it was trying to unravel and re ravel. At least it might not have done. This might be somewhere new.

He stepped out into the sunshine to find himself in a big circular arena. The wide floor was sand at the edge and short scrubby grass in the middle and was bordered by a smooth and seamless wooden fence. Beyond this there were seats

rising in tiers to just below the high, clear dome that covered the whole amphitheatre.

The Doctor walked a little way across the sand and stood looking around him. To one side of the tunnel entrance Leela was examining the fence.

‘It’s a sports arena by the look of it,’ the Doctor said. ‘Now all we have to do is work out what the sport might be.’

‘I am not certain,’ Leela said, ‘but I think this wall is splashed with blood.’

Jerro Fanson couldn’t quite believe what was happening. It was obviously a scuffle-up, but even so, even by the standards of this bunch of button-pushers, it was shambling scuffwittery. He shifted slightly on the tilted couch.

‘Do you deny you quarrelled with Jon Michaelson?’ The Interrogation Controller looked down at the detector screen as he waited for Fanson’s reply.

‘No.’

‘Again. Do you deny you quarrelled with Jon Michaelson?’

This time Fanson waited until the small, eyelevel screen flashed REPLY at him, indicating that the computer had balanced all the data variables outputting from his body and brain, and was ready to analyse the minutest change in relation to his answer. ‘No I do not deny I quarrelled with Jon Michaelson.’

On the Interrogation Controller’s screen the single word TRUE flashed up.

On Fanson’s screen an abstract pattern of shapes and colours danced and changed, making it difficult to think and plan ahead. He tried not to look at it. He had to concentrate. The struggle between interrogator and prisoner was the same as it had always been, always would be, whatever advances were made in the state of the art. Some men were better fitted to resist than others, but all men ultimately had a breaking point. The only possible escape was through the truth and the hope that the truth that was told would obscure the truth that was hidden. Since he was innocent Fanson had only one truth to hide. He wasn’t sure why

exactly, but he knew he must buy Keefer some time. He was determined not to tell them that the kid was alive.

‘What did you quarrel about?’

On the screen the mesmerising pattern coalesced and the word REPLY flashed in his eyes.

‘Status.’

On the Controller’s screen the computer registered TRUE: POSSIBLE EVASION.

‘Whose status?’

‘Mine.’

TRUE: PROBABLE EVASION. The Controller made a note to return and develop that line if he hit a block on the main attack.

‘Did you kill Jon Michaelson?’

Fanson allowed himself to relax very slightly. He was back on safe ground. Since he hadn’t killed Michaelson the machine was bound to register the truth of his denial. That should give them all a sudden rush of blood to the panic button. REPLY shone into his eyes. No. I did not kill Jon Michaelson,’ he said firmly.

On the Controller’s screen the computer’s evaluation was unequivocal. FALSE: DIRECT LIE. Despite a small surge of triumph, the Interrogation Controller was careful to maintain a neutral tone. I repeat. Did you kill Jon Michaelson?’

The Doctor peered more closely at the stains on the wood of the arena fence. ‘It certainly looks like blood. And there seems to be a lot of it.’ He walked further along, examining the wall as he went. ‘In fact it’s everywhere.’

‘Do you think it is human?’

He shook his head and shrugged uncertainly. ‘Anything’s possible. But if it is, someone’s had rather more than a nosebleed.’ For some reason he could not quite fathom, the light coming through the dome seemed colder suddenly, less bright.

‘This is not a good place,’ Leela said, frowning. ‘This cannot be a place for sport . Why would there be blood shed? To shed blood for sport is not reasonable. This,’ she gestured at

the bloodstains, 'this tells of much killing. What would be the point of such killing for sport?'

A matter of instinct; the Doctor said. 'It often overrides reason. You should certainly understand that.'

'Why?'

'The Sevateem always killed for a reason?'

Leela glared at him. 'Warriors never kill for pleasure.'

'Never *just* for pleasure perhaps,' the Doctor suggested.

'There is no pleasure in killing,' Leela said flatly.

Behind them a voice, heavy with shocked outrage and menace, said, 'What in the name of all the gods do you imagine you're doing?'

The Doctor turned and smiled at the heavy-set man in the one-piece black uniform. He had 'security' blazoned across his chest in fluorescent yellow, and low on his hip a handgun hung in an open holster. 'I don't do anything in the name of gods,' the Doctor said, 'but if you're the cleaner you're not doing a very good job.' He gestured vaguely round at the blood-spattered fence. 'You missed a bit.'

'Those are sacred death marks,' the security man snarled.

'Sacred death marks, how very jolly,' the Doctor said. 'So much more civilised than plain old guts and gore.'

The security man stepped forward and thrust his face threateningly close to the Doctor's. 'Have you defiled them?' he demanded.

'Not that I'm aware of,' the Doctor said, still smiling politely. 'Define defile?'

'Have you touched them?'

'No.'

The security man leaned even closer, so that he and the Doctor were almost nose to nose. 'You're lying,' he accused. 'You have touched them.'

The Doctor did not move back from the confrontation or change his tone of voice. 'No.'

'You're lying. I can tell by your voice that you're lying.'

'To tell someone's lying by the sound of their voice is a rare and remarkable talent,' the Doctor said. 'Obviously it's not one of your talents but it would be difficult to find fault with

the ambition.’ He reached into the pocket of his long coat, rummaged about and pulled out a battered paper bag. ‘Would you like a jelly baby?’

‘You’re a liar, a blasphemer, a defiler of the holy arena,’ the security man intoned.

‘I take it that’s a no,’ the Doctor said.

The security man stepped backwards never taking his eyes from the Doctor’s face. ‘Are you looking for a fight?’ he asked in an abrupt and oddly formal way.

‘I’m looking for an orange jelly baby,’ the Doctor said, shaking the bag and poking around in it.

From somewhere high up in the dome there was an electronic crackle and then a disembodied voice boomed over the public address system, ‘What are you doing Jarvis?’

‘I’m declaring a spot challenge,’ the security man announced to the air. ‘Right here, right now.’

All round the arena fence tiny slots opened at regular intervals and small jewel-bright lenses extended slightly then retracted flush with the wooden surface. There were several hundred of them glittering in the sunlight like the dead irises of hidden glass eyes.

‘In the arena?’ the voice demanded. ‘Are you mad?’

‘It’s a legal challenge,’ the security man said, though he sounded defiant rather than certain. ‘I name and claim the ground.’

‘The arena?’ The voice was incredulous, almost amused. ‘You can’t fight in the arena, man. You haven’t earned it. Are you professionally ranked, I don’t think so. Are there any memorable kills in your reel, not that I’ve noticed. Has the arena just been cleansed, I do believe it has.’

‘This man has broken in and defiled it.’ The security man took another step backwards still watching the Doctor’s face and loosened the handgun in its holster.

‘You could be letting this whole defilement-contamination thing get out of hand, you know,’ the Doctor said. ‘Remember today’s habits and rituals are tomorrow’s obsessive compulsive disorders. I can’t remember who told me that. I

don't think it was Freud. One of the religious leaders perhaps. But which one, they all benefit from it after all...'

But the security man was not to be distracted or deflected. 'He's in violation.'

'Are you sure you wouldn't like a jelly baby?' The Doctor proffered the bag. 'There are no orange ones left, I'm afraid, but I can recommend the green ones.'

'Nobody move!' the voice on the PA ordered. 'I'm coming to sort this out.'

'Do you accept the challenge?' the security man asked quietly.

The Doctor selected a green jelly baby and put the bag back into his coat pocket. 'Aren't we supposed to wait?' he said, chewing appreciatively.

'There's no reason to wait,' the security man urged. 'The systems are recording. All the legalities are in place. You must fight me. You have no choice.'

The Doctor smiled and stuck both hands into his trouser pockets. 'There's always a choice.'

Once again the security man loosened the handgun in its holster. 'You must fight me,' he repeated. 'You have no choice.'

'Yes he has,' Leela said, stepping between them.

'A chancer,' the security man sneered triumphantly. 'Two kills should rank me.' And he pulled the gun.

Leela ducked inside the arc of the draw and, before the security man could bring the gun to bear, she kned him hard in the groin. He grunted and as he bent slightly with the pain she straightened up and hit the bottom of his jaw with the top of her head. His teeth clashed together and he began to tip backwards. She grabbed the wrist of his gun hand and pivoted, twisting the arm against the weight of his fall. His elbow cracked stickily and he let go of the gun. He fell heavily with the broken arm underneath him and lay sobbing with pain. 'You wanted to fight,' Leela said. She picked up the gun and threw it across the arena. 'The Doctor tried to persuade you not to.' She put her foot on the security man's throat, drew her knife and reached down with it so that the tip of the

blade rested on the bridge of his nose. 'You should be more friendly.'

'That's enough, Leela,' the Doctor said, pulling her away. 'The man's hurt. You've hurt him enough.'

The security man lay silent now, his eyes closed, his face screwed up against the pain. He seemed to be waiting for something to happen.

Leela sheathed the knife. 'I was not going to kill him,' she said matter-of-factly. 'He was going to kill you though.'

'A bit aggressive,' the Doctor agreed, 'even by the standards of your average security guard.' The man's eyes were still tight shut and he was still not moving or making a sound. The Doctor squatted down beside him. 'It's all right, Jarvis. That is your name isn't it?'

Leela said, 'He wanted you to fight him so that he could kill you.'

'I gathered that,' the Doctor said, 'but he does seem to have gone off the idea now.'

Leela poked the fallen man with her foot. 'He is pretending to be dead.' She poked him again only harder this time. 'Playing dead fools no one,' she said loudly at his clenched face.

'I'm going to try and get you some help, Jarvis.' The Doctor stood up. 'And in the meantime Leela's going to stop kicking you. Aren't you Leela?'

'The man is not a warrior,' Leela said contemptuously. 'He challenges you to fight and when he loses he sulks like a child.' She leaned down and shouted directly at his face, 'Like a frightened child!' Stubbornly the security man did not move or open his eyes. 'Do you think I should cut his throat, Doctor?'

'I think you should stop tormenting him,' the Doctor said. 'It's probably not good for him and it's obviously very bad for you.'

'What is he waiting for?' Leela demanded. 'I do not understand what he thinks is going to happen.'

The Doctor peered up into the dome. 'The disembodied voice claimed to be coming to sort this out. Maybe he's in a

lot more trouble than we realise.’ He surveyed the arena carefully. ‘There seems to be only one way in or out of this place.’ He nodded at the entrance to the tunnel they had come from. ‘So if there’s medical help to hand it’ll be somewhere in there presumably.’ He started to walk towards it. ‘Are you coming with me or are you staying to look after Jarvis?’

Leela trotted after the Doctor. ‘He can look after himself,’ she said. ‘It is not my fault that he is injured.’

But before the Doctor and Leela could leave the arena, several more security men, black-clad and burly, marched in double time from the tunnel entrance and formed out into a skirmish line in front of them. After a few moments a small, dapper man dressed in a soft grey uniform, which did not carry the anonymous identification that marked the others, bustled out of the tunnel. He stopped abruptly when he caught sight of Jarvis lying on the ground. ‘Who did that?’ he demanded.

‘It was a misunderstanding,’ the Doctor said. ‘A clash of cultures.’

‘A clash of cultures? What does that mean?’

The Doctor shrugged. ‘He lacked culture and there was a clash.’ He walked back to the fallen man. ‘His arm’s broken I’m afraid but it could have been worse.’ He flashed a grin at Leela. ‘A lot worse.’

‘A lot worse?’ The man in grey shook his head in a dumb-show of disbelief. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘Trust me, I’m the Doctor,’ the Doctor said. ‘My companion was comparatively restrained.’

‘Your companion?’ The man in grey turned his attention to Leela. ‘You are responsible for this?’

‘I broke his arm if that is what you are asking,’ Leela said defiantly. ‘But he is responsible for what happened to him. He wished to fight. I fought him. He lost. Do you wish to fight me now?’ She looked from one to another among the security men. ‘Any of you?’

‘You haven’t killed him,’ the man in grey said.

On the ground Jarvis gasped softly and his closed eyes clenched more tightly shut but apart from that he made no sound or movement.

Leela said, 'Of course not. Why should I kill him?' She looked at the Doctor. 'A warrior does not kill unnecessarily.'

The small man in grey sighed and shook his head again. 'A challenge has been made,' he said in a voice that suggested he regarded Leela as a rather stupid and recalcitrant child. 'Blood has been spilled. You have prevailed. You must kill him. It's not seemly to toy with him here. It may be the modern way. It may be the way the tri-dee audiences like it. But that is not how it's done here. Not here. Now kill him. Kill him! Kill him now!'

'Now just a minute,' the Doctor protested.

The man did not look at him. 'I'm not talking to you,' he said. 'This does not concern you.'

'It most certainly does concern me,' the Doctor said. 'I will not have this. You will not -'

'I will not kill him,' Leela interrupted, speaking as much to the Doctor as to the small man who confronted her.

'This is the arena,' the man went on in the same didactic slightly theatrical tone. 'This is the theatre of dreams. You have no choice.'

'There is always a choice,' Leela said.

The small man in grey gave up. He gestured the security men forward. 'Arrest her,' he said waving dismissively in Leela's direction.

'Wait a minute.' The Doctor put a protective arm in front of Leela. 'You're planning to arrest her for *not* killing someone? That's perverse.'

'Who are you exactly?' The small man in grey managed to make the question sound dismissive, more like an insult than a question.

'I'm the Doctor. Who are you exactly?' The Doctor echoed the man's tone more or less exactly.

The man did not react. 'Are you her agent, her manager, what?'

‘I’m responsible for her,’ the Doctor said. ‘And you didn’t answer my question.’

‘Question?’

‘Who are you?’

‘You really don’t know?’ The man looked theatrically sceptical.

‘Escaped lunatic,’ the Doctor suggested, ‘head of security, what?’

‘I’m the Senior Umpire and in this instance I’m the de facto match referee.’

‘Shouldn’t you be wearing black,’ the Doctor said. ‘I seem to remember there was a chant: who’s the person in the black? No I don’t think that was it...’

‘I’m declaring a rule violation,’ the man said. ‘Your client has left me no choice. The contest is void.’

Jarvis opened his eyes. ‘Is that official?’ he asked.

The referee ignored him. ‘Your client will appear at the Court of Attack,’ he went on, ‘at which time I assume you will wish to represent her.’

Jarvis struggled up into a sitting position. ‘Give me back my gun,’ he said, ‘and I’ll deal with the little bitch now.’

The referee went to where Leela had thrown Jarvis’s handgun and picked it up. He hustled back with it.

‘There’s no reason to waste the court’s time,’ Jarvis continued, ‘on some scuffling chancer. Let’s see her outrun a bullet.’

The referee cocked the handgun. The Doctor stepped in front of Leela. ‘I don’t know what you people have got in mind,’ he said. ‘But it isn’t going to happen.’

Casually the referee shot Jarvis through the top of the head. ‘As I was saying; I assume you’ll wish to represent your client at the Court of Attack. Do you wish to accompany her into custody?’

‘Yes,’ the Doctor said, staring at the body of the dead security man. Bone fragments, blood and brain matter had splattered into the sand and Jarvis had slumped forward, a sudden limp and sagging parody of life.

‘You do realise the seriousness of her position?’ the referee said.

Leela was trying to get past the Doctor but he held her behind him with a restraining arm. ‘I’m beginning to,’ he said.

‘I am not afraid of these people,’ Leela protested.

The Doctor said, ‘As contests go summary execution is a bit one-sided.’

The referee handed the gun to one of the security men. ‘He should have been dead already,’ he said, flicking imaginary specks from his grey uniform. ‘And his attitude and behaviour confirmed the problem.’ He frowned up at the Doctor. ‘I realise you people don’t have to be qualified but you’re not going to be much help to your fighter without at least a rudimentary understanding of the rulebook.’

‘There’s a rulebook for such deliberate murder?’ the Doctor asked.

‘I won’t dignify that with an answer,’ the referee said.

‘It was a silly question,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘There’s always a rulebook. Every culture has a rulebook and they’re all different and they’re all convenient for somebody.’

The referee turned his attention to the squad of security men. ‘I want every particle of that cleaned up,’ he said indicating Jarvis and the mess that had been his head. ‘It cannot be allowed to contaminate the arena.’

‘No sacred death marks involved then,’ the Doctor murmured.

‘There was nothing sacred about any of this,’ the referee said. ‘It was a scuffle not a fight.’

Leela said, ‘A fight is a fight. If it is fought honestly between warriors it is honourable but it is just a fight.’

‘You should have thought of that,’ the referee said, ‘before you decided that the rules did not apply to you.’ He turned on his heel. ‘And take these two to the Court of Attack and put them in the lock-up,’ he said to the security squad as he hustled past them on his way to the tunnel.

* * *

A hunted man will usually go for a hiding place below normal eye-level and his pursuers will look to the ground in their search for him. The instinctive crouch is common to hunter and hunted alike. This was why Keefer had climbed up into one of the trees to wait.

By full dark no one had come and he was satisfied that, for the moment anyway, his adversary considered him dead. Whoever it was might be godlike in other ways, but at least they weren't omniscient. He had thought while he waited, but for the life of him he couldn't work out which of the two possibilities it was most likely to be. And that was the point: it was for the life of him...

Carefully he took a second night-sight lens from his weapons belt and dropped it into his left eye. He blinked rapidly to position the tiny image intensifier and waited for his optic nerves to adjust to the return to stereoscopic vision. Some definition was lost now that both eyes contained the lenses but flat vision, no matter how bright and clear, was no good when you were moving. And moving fast and far was Reefer's next priority. It was only a matter of time before the forensic team finished sifting the roasted crud they had scraped off the road and discovered that he was not one of the ingredients. He needed to be long gone before that happened.

At the base of the tree he paused briefly to allow his muscles to uncramp. He breathed deeply and slowly, consciously relaxing and boosting the oxygen in his blood to its optimum level. At the same time he switched a moment's total concentration to each of his senses in turn. Sight, hearing, smell, touch, even the taste of the air around him was for a fleeting instant his only contact with reality, the only input his brain acknowledged. It was a personal discipline he had painstakingly developed and practised until it was virtually automatic. In a few seconds every sense was tuned and Keefer had become the perfect refinement of his ancestral line. The fine-honed instincts of the killer-ape were balanced and ready to be channelled by the brain of the thinking man.

He moved off, heading away from the road towards the fields on the far edge of the wood. As the trees and undergrowth thinned out he increased his pace, so that by the time he reached the last of the cover he was running. Before he hit the open ground he changed direction suddenly, ran parallel to the boundary of the wood, then swerved again and headed out at a flat run.

Almost immediately a prickling blaze of small-calibre tracer bullets burned through the darkness. Thin streams of killing light smashed through the wood at the point where Keefer should have emerged if he had followed the direct line into the open. But he had not followed the direct line and this made the use of tracers a bad tactical error.

The incandescent brightness blinded the marksmen's night-scopes leaving their target unseen and momentarily unseeable. That gave Keefer the edge. Although the sudden light blinded him too he plunged on, his eyes closed, his remaining senses hyped-up and compensating. And Keefer was fast.

The firing stopped as suddenly as it had begun. In the abrupt darkness Keefer dropped to the ground. Although his eyes were closed he knew he had flanked two firing positions. Soundlessly he drew the ancient handgun he favoured for multiple contests. His nose told him these were men. Androids didn't sweat or touch the air with the taste of fear.

As the afterimage faded from the lids he opened his eyes again. In a shallow depression about twenty metres from where he lay were two men. They were scanning the wood with their night-scopes, anxiously searching for signs of movement. Keefer snaked towards them.

From a range of five metres he carefully shot one of them in the base of the skull. The roar of the gun and the impact of the bullet, which tore off most of his companion's head, froze the other man into blank-eyed terror.

Keefer crawled closer. 'Run you scuffler!' he hissed and fired another round, which kicked up a gout of earth by the man's face.

Sobbing incoherently the man staggered to his feet and began to run towards the wood. Keefer rolled into the depression and snatched up a discarded gun. Closing his eyes against the light he fired a burst of tracers in the general direction of the fleeing figure.

Following the cue three other guns opened up, two to Keefer's left and one to his right. As the deadly lines converged on the running man Keefer moved on the sound to his left. With a bubbling scream the runner went down but the marksmen continued to fire, pouring bullets into the twitching body, cutting and smashing it into bloody, smouldering pieces.

When the firing stopped Keefer was in position. In front of him two men stood up. They were excited by the kill, breathing hard and giggling.

'Missed,' said Keefer quietly and fired the handgun as they turned.

The heavy bullet punched into one of them. He was dead before he hit the ground. The second man spread his hands in supplication. 'Don't kill me. Please don't kill me.'

Keefer gestured with his gun. 'That way,' he said softly. 'Walk in that direction. Walk slowly with your hands down and your mouth shut.' Keefer stepped behind him and prodded him forward with the gun. 'Move!'

Stumbling slightly the man did as he was told and when they had walked a short distance Keefer prodded him again. 'Now run,' he whispered.

'Run?'

'Run!' Keefer hissed and shoved him hard in the back. The man stumbled forward and broke into a shambling run. Keefer angled away from him then stood quite motionless, his gun half raised. He counted five slowly then he shouted at the top of his voice: 'Look out, he's coming your way!'

A burst of tracer fire chopped into the man. In the split second before his night-lenses blanked with the overload Keefer aimed and fired just above the muzzle-flash.

Chapter Three

Of all the cell blocks in all the worlds the Doctor had ever been thrown into, the Court of Attack lock-up was certainly among the more unusual, he thought. Apart from the one threatening detail it could almost be described as pleasant. The communal areas were well appointed with comfortable furniture, reference books and computer workstations. There were very few prisoners, and those there were each had a small self-contained suite of rooms to which only they had unrestricted access. There were no locks on any of the doors and no guards anywhere in evidence. If it wasn't for that one threatening detail, the wrist and ankle bands he and Leela had been fitted with when they arrived, he could almost have convinced himself that this was a voluntary programme of some sort. 'This is getting to be a habit,' he said, sitting down on one of the padded benches in the library area. 'For a law-abiding Time Lord I seem to have ended up in jail rather a lot recently.'

Unexpectedly, and not a little unsettlingly, the Doctor thought, Leela's knife had not been taken away from her. She was using it to pick at one of her ankle bands. 'I thought you stole the TARDIS,' she said. 'Is that law-abiding where you came from?'

'Don't do that,' the Doctor warned. He had a bad feeling about the narrow, seamless metallic strips that fitted so snugly and comfortably that you could easily forget they were there. At least you could if you were not Leela.

'I will not accept marks of defeat from these cowards,' she said, trying to push the point of the knife behind the band.

'I've seen similar-looking devices before,' the Doctor said. He had given the bands some small consideration. They were obviously not for simple identification: why would they need four? And the same objection applied to simple locators. So

why put one on each wrist and one on each ankle? The conclusion was fairly obvious. I think they might be the only thing keeping people under control here.'

Leela carried on working with the knife. 'All the more reason to remove them,' she said reasonably.

'My guess is if you damage that thing something quite unpleasant will happen. I think it might tighten up. Probably the other three will too.'

Stubbornly Leela carried on probing with the knife. 'I am not afraid of them.'

'You don't have to be afraid of them,' the Doctor said, struggling not to lose all patience with the irritatingly primitive girl. 'You just have to be rational. This appears to be an extremely violent society, so I doubt whether these things will just twinkle and buzz and play jolly jingles if you set them off. So until we know what it is they do instead...'

Leela stopped what she was doing and sheathed the knife. 'If the threat from them is supposed to keep us here why do they not tell us what it is? A threat is not a threat unless you know what it is.'

The Doctor shrugged. 'They assume we know already or else it doesn't matter to them.'

Leela held up her wrists. 'Are these what they would use on you for stealing the TARDIS? If they caught you?'

The Doctor did his best to sound mildly affronted. 'What gives you the idea I stole the TARDIS?'

'It is what you said.'

He didn't remember saying that. The trouble with Leela was that she listened to everything and remembered most of it. He must try to remember that. He smiled at her and said, 'You misunderstood me.' What happens now, he wondered? Presumably this Court of Attack thing was some sort of legal process, but what sort, and when and where did it happen? He got up and wandered across to one of the bookcases. It was probably too much to hope that they might have a beginner's guide to breaches of the rulebook. *A Child's Garden of Murder and Mayhem*, perhaps. *The Care and Maintenance of Sacred Death Marks?*

‘You did not steal the TARDIS?’ Leela persisted.

That was another problem, the Doctor thought. She was persistent. ‘Not exactly,’ he said. ‘It was more of a technical infringement.’ Disappointingly, the books all appeared to be heavyweight legal tomes, the sort that required years of study before you could understand the chapter headings never mind the main body of the text. He pulled one of the books from a shelf at random and opened it. It seemed to be a book of case law but all the cases were fights. The declarations, the moves and the kills were described in detail and then a summary outlined the effect each element had on the duelling laws. The fights were in chronological order, he realised, and were all of a particular type: in this case, or rather in these cases, the fights involved the use of one particular sort of handgun. He took down another volume. It was laid out in the same way but now the fights involved the combatants each using a different one of two particular sorts of handgun.

‘What is a technical infringement?’ Leela asked.

The Doctor said, ‘It’s a rule nobody knows about until they break it.’ There were probably books for every sort of combat and kill, he realised, and there were hundreds of them. Perverse, is that what he’d said? Perverse didn’t begin to cover it.

‘Isn’t that the truth,’ a plump man at one of the corner workstations said. The Doctor hadn’t noticed him slouched down behind his computer screen. ‘Technical infringements,’ the man went on. ‘I tell you the rules are getting impossible to interpret.’ He shook his head and tutted. ‘Sooner or later there’s going to have to be a full Kill-council to rework the rulebook. Sooner rather than later actually or we’re all doomed.’

‘You’re not a lawyer by any chance?’ the Doctor asked him hopefully.

‘Agent,’ the man said. ‘Jerro Fanson’s my name. And you are?’

‘I’m the Doctor,’ the Doctor said, smiling in what he hoped was an encouragingly intimate way, ‘and this is Leela.’

‘She’s your fighter I take it,’ Fanson offered.

‘In a manner of speaking, I suppose you could say that, yes,’ the Doctor said. His response sounded lame even to him, but knowledge was power and if he was going to learn more without appearing too ignorantly helpless he needed to keep it vague.

‘Oh gods,’ Fanson groaned, ‘you’re not another scuffling freelance operator are you?’

‘You’re not a freelance operator I take it,’ the Doctor said.

‘Scuffling right I’m not.’

The Doctor nodded knowingly. ‘I thought not,’ he said and was waiting to hear what the alternative was when Leela put in, ‘What is a freelance operator? Is it a warrior code?’

Fanson looked at the Doctor and raised a quizzical eyebrow. ‘Your fighter taken the odd blow to the head?’

‘She comes from a warrior tribe,’ the Doctor said. ‘She can be a bit obsessive. And aggressive. Obsessively aggressive on occasions.’

‘All the best ones are,’ Fanson said. ‘But they’re not usually that simple-minded.’

Leela prowled towards Fanson. ‘I dislike being talked about as if I was not here,’ she said.

‘She moves well though,’ Fanson commented.

‘If it is a fighting discipline,’ Leela remarked to the Doctor, ‘he is clearly not in any shape to be a freelance operator. The question would not have been asked. Therefore it is not a fighting discipline.’

‘It isn’t a fighting discipline, Leela,’ the Doctor assured her, trying to get her to shut up. The trouble was, he knew, if she realised you were trying to shut her up it usually made her that much more determined to be heard.

Fanson snorted. ‘It undermines any sort of discipline if you ask me. How in gods’ names are we supposed to get standard contracts, proper league structures, an insurance fund that isn’t a joke, while freelance agents are running around the place making whatever deals they feel like.’

‘How indeed?’ the Doctor agreed.

Fanson looked at Leela. 'Is she quick?' he asked the Doctor. 'I've got a fighter who is quick. I mean this kid is really quick over the ground. And gaudy.' He grinned to himself, for a moment lost in recollection. 'Some of his coups have been spec-scuffling-tacular. I'm talking Prime. Prime in everything but coverage and cash of course. But that was coming. I had seriously high hopes for the both of us until it all started to go TTU.'

'TTU?'

'Terminally tits up.' For a moment Fanson looked uncertain. Watching his face the Doctor had the feeling that uncertainty was not something the man was familiar with. Fanson sighed abruptly and smiled. 'Like the fighters say: in this game you only get to lose once and you're the only one who doesn't know you came second.' The uncertainty was gone as if it had never been. 'So what are you, Guild or freelance?'

The alternative was some sort of guild then, the Doctor thought - some sort of agents' organisation presumably. And if he wanted this man's good opinion and help then 'Guild' was the correct answer. But supposing there was a badge, or a password, or some sort of secret handshake - you never knew what sort of nonsense was involved in membership of such groups - and anyway it wasn't the truth, it wasn't even true, so how would it help... 'I haven't been accepted yet,' he heard himself saying. 'It's my ambition to join as soon as the details can be sorted out.'

'You wouldn't be lying to me now would you,' Fanson said wryly.

'I'm new to all this,' the Doctor said, 'but when I know what the right thing to do is I will try to do it.'

Fanson looked amused. 'You didn't answer the question did you.'

The Doctor said, 'I'm sorry I thought it was rhetorical. No I'm not lying to you.' Not technically anyway, he thought. Technically what I've said is true.

‘Not even a technical infringement of the truth?’ Fanson asked, as if he had read the Doctor’s mind and was deliberately echoing his thought.

He hadn’t, of course, the Doctor could see that much from his face. It was just probability in action again, another coincidence waiting for the gullible. ‘What makes you say that?’ he asked.

Fanson grinned. ‘I heard you talking to your fighter. Something about theft as a technical infringement?’

‘You misunderstood.’

‘That’s what you told her.’

‘It was true,’ the Doctor said, and thought: as opposed to truth, which is technically more rigorous.

‘Technically,’ Fanson suggested.

He did it again, the Doctor thought. ‘Technically,’ he agreed. Not so much a coincidence then more an instinctive understanding of what the other person might be thinking, he realised. Unless the other person was Leela of course.

‘I misunderstood,’ she said, glaring at Fanson. Deliberately she rested her hand on the hilt of her knife. ‘It is not your concern.’

‘True,’ Fanson said. ‘I wouldn’t wave that gut-sticker about, by the way. Not without getting a very clear line to the nearest scanner.’ He pointed to a wall-mounted plate on the other side of the room. It was mirror-shiny and about the size of a man’s hand. ‘You might get to it in time but I wouldn’t bet my blood on it, kid. You’d be amazed how fast these new restraints work. They’ll cut your hands and feet off in a heartbeat.’

Leela scowled at him and wrapped her hand round the hilt as if to pull the knife. ‘Why should I believe you?’ she demanded.

Fanson shrugged and yawned. ‘Because I have your best interests at heart,’ he suggested. ‘Or because I couldn’t give a rat’s arse about you. Either way I have no reason to lie.’

‘People can lie whether they have reason to or not,’ Leela said.

Fanson shook his head dismissively. 'There's always a reason. You can't always spot what it is, but there's always a reason.'

The Doctor was making a cursory search for something that might give him an idea of the contents of the law library. 'Nothing is without reason,' he murmured. 'It is the only thing that is.' He glanced across at Fanson. 'Are these all the law books that are available? Is there an index do you know?'

'What are you looking for exactly?'

'I don't know exactly,' the Doctor said. 'Technical infringements I suppose.'

'There's a surprise. What sort of technical infringements do you suppose?'

'I'm having trouble understanding the details,' the Doctor admitted.

'And the surprises keep on coming,' Fanson smirked.

Leela was still hostile, bristling with it, the Doctor could see. Perhaps it was because Fanson was the only stranger around and she needed someone to blame, he thought. 'And you?' she demanded of the man. 'What are you here for?' Or perhaps it was because he seemed unfazed by her aggression: more than that it was as though it was what he expected and judged her by.

'Listen kid; Fanson said, not unkindly, 'you don't ask people that in places like this. It's bad manners.'

'She's young,' the Doctor said. 'She doesn't understand the etiquette of these things. So what *are* you here for?'

'Murder as it happens.'

'That's a crime?' The Doctor could not keep the surprise out of his voice.

'It would be if I'd done it,' Fanson said, apparently taking the Doctor's tone as ironic.

'There you are you see,' the Doctor said, this time making the tone more definitely satirical, 'just when you think you've started to work it all out, nothing makes sense all over again. We're here on exactly the opposite charge.'

Fanson looked puzzled. 'Which is?'

'Non-murder presumably.'

‘There’s no such crime as non-murder.’

‘Leela’s charged with refusing to kill somebody. That’s non-murder in my book.’ He gestured around. ‘Though not in most of these I imagine.’

It was Fanson’s turn to be shocked. ‘Wait a minute, wait a scuffling minute here.’ He turned off his computer terminal and gave the Doctor his full attention. ‘Was this in a fight? We’re not talking about a terminated challenge are we?’

‘I don’t know,’ the Doctor said. ‘Are we?’

Fanson looked at Leela. ‘You left a challenger alive?’ he asked and when Leela nodded went on, ‘How feeble-minded are you? What happened, weren’t you paying attention, you got bored, you got distracted scratching your arse, what?’

‘He wanted to fight, I fought him, he lost,’ Leela said matter-of-factly. It was becoming a mantra the Doctor thought. ‘He was beaten. I did not need to kill him,’ she continued in the same bored voice. ‘I am a warrior. A warrior does not enjoy killing. A warrior does not kill unnecessarily.’ She made a point of not looking at the Doctor. ‘Despite what some people think.’

‘You did it deliberately.’ He looked at the Doctor. ‘She did it deliberately. I don’t know what to say. I’m speechless. I’m lost for words. Where were you?’

‘I was there.’

‘You were there. You let her do it. What were you thinking? That’s not a technical infringement, that’s not a terminated challenge that’s an unconsummated kill.’

‘Is that a technical term?’ the Doctor asked.

‘That’s a scuffling disaster,’ Fanson declared.

The Doctor smiled what he hoped was a calm and resolute smile. What he needed was information not comment. ‘Would there be case law on unconsummated kills?’

‘Oh there’ll be some. Not a lot and none of it will help your case. You realise she could be skullcapped. Gods, if it was really blatant she could be skullcapped and then cut loose on an open contract. Whatever happens to her you might as well get used to this place, you’re never getting out of here. Not with your feet and hands still attached anyway.’

‘Where would I find these references?’ the Doctor asked. ‘And some general material on the Court of Attack procedures.’

Fanson thought for a moment then sighed a theatrical sigh. ‘Come here and I’ll show you,’ he said, switching his computer console back on. ‘We agents should stick together I suppose.’

The Doctor smiled and said, ‘We must hang together or we will surely hang separately.’

‘That’s not bad,’ Fanson said. ‘I must remember that one.’

‘What is skull-capped?’ Leela asked suspiciously.

‘Where did you find her?’ Fanson shook his head in mock disbelief. ‘She really doesn’t understand anything does she?’

Leela pulled the knife and held it low and loose and casually threatening. ‘That is why I ask questions,’ she said, staring hard at Fanson. ‘The Doctor says there is no shame in ignorance, only superstitiously clinging to ignorance is shameful.’

‘I wasn’t joking about that knife,’ Fanson said. He glanced up at the Doctor, who was standing beside him peering at the computer screen. ‘Tell her will you. She obviously doesn’t know what’s good for her.’

‘I can’t tell her what to do,’ the Doctor said and thought: not if she realises that’s what I’m doing anyway. ‘She has a mind of her own.’

‘Well who else would want it,’ Fanson smirked.

Leela said, ‘I am making no movements that I have not made already without consequence. If the system is automatic then I am in no danger.’

Fanson looked at her in surprise and then gave a small nod of acknowledgement. ‘But you were bluffing in that case, so why take the risk at all?’

‘Never assume she’s bluffing,’ the Doctor murmured. ‘And if you do, never tell her so. She takes it as a challenge.’

Fanson looked from Leela to the Doctor, to Leela and back to the Doctor again. It seemed to the Doctor that he was looking at them critically for the first time and was suddenly

unsettled by what he was seeing. 'Where did you say you people were from?'

'Does it matter?' the Doctor asked trying to keep it cheerful.

Fanson did not respond cheerfully. 'It might. I think it might.'

'We're not local,' the Doctor admitted. 'But we hang together or we hang separately, isn't that what we said?'

'It's what you said.' Fanson frowned thoughtfully. 'Point is I'm innocent.'

'Exactly,' said the Doctor. 'So are we.'

'No you're not, you did it.'

'Technically,' Leela offered.

Fanson half smiled and then shook his head and frowned again.

'I've got problems of my own. Something's gone wrong, I need to find out what it is.'

The Doctor said, 'Maybe we can help you.'

'That seems unlikely.'

'You never know,' the Doctor said. 'We could be good friends to have.'

'Oh spare me the threats,' Fanson scoffed.

The Doctor was puzzled. 'Threats?' How was offering to be friends a threat? Of course if you lived in a society that was based on a code of violence that was enshrined in law, that *was* the law apparently, you might well be suspicious. You're only paranoid if they're not out to get you and in this world it appeared everyone was. 'I don't think I understand.'

'I've been threatened by the best,' Fanson said.

'People threatening friendship,' the Doctor suggested. 'Or if they were the best, threatening best-friendship presumably.'

If Fanson recognised the attempt at humour he gave no sign of it. 'You could be good friends or bad enemies right?'

'No, I'm not really in the market for any more enemies,' the Doctor said. 'They take up too much time and attention, I find. And they can get a bit boring. But if you have a particular need for enemies I can recommend one or two unpleasant life forms lurking around the universe that I would be more than happy to see the back of. I have a soft

spot for the Daleks myself. It's a swamp on Rigella Five but I've never been able to get them into it. Very boring creatures, Daleks.' I'm babbling inanely, he thought. Why do I babble inanely when I'm having trouble persuading someone to do what I want them to do? Is it panic? I end up not making much sense. It's probably panic.

'You are not making much sense, Doctor,' Leela said.

'That's a relief,' Fanson said. 'I thought it was me.'

'You weren't making sense either,' the Doctor said. 'I was panicking, what was your excuse?'

'You're entirely insane aren't you?' Fanson said, and then he snorted and chortled. 'It's no defence you know. The Court of Attack doesn't recognise insanity.'

The Doctor smiled his vivid smile. 'It could swing from the light fittings and gibber,' he said, 'and nobody I've met so far would recognise it.'

'Everybody's mad except you,' Fanson said.

'I do hope not,' the Doctor said. 'I was counting on your good sense to help get us out of here.' He was almost sure that Fanson was the sort of natural con man who naturally couldn't resist being conned.

'You could have been a great agent,' Fanson said. 'You're a natural.'

Keefer had collected the five bodies and carried them, together with their guns and equipment, into the shelter of the trees. He was intending to cover them with brushwood, hoping against hope that they wouldn't be found until he was away and running, but the full realisation of how quickly his enemy had reacted brought him to a standstill. The assassin, the gun-ship, the ambush; each attack cued by the failure of the previous one. What was the point of running? If they knew he was alive before, then they knew it now.

If they knew he was alive before...

He looked at the men he had killed. They carried no communications equipment. Their IDs said they weren't government and their performance said they weren't professionals. Private citizens then, borderline psychos who'd

just scraped through the computer screening in all probability. Gun club freaks maybe, looking for one illegal chance to try the kick of murder. That would explain the tracers: thrill before skill. One thing was certain, they weren't a fast assault group thrown in to meet a sudden emergency. In which case they were probably there all the time. They were there all the time.

It was the same with the gun-ship. It would have come whether the assassin had succeeded or not. Once he'd got it, the answer was obvious. Redundant systems. It was a complete fail-safe pattern designed to operate automatically, built in just as it would be for any mechanical system. His moves had been computed in advance, like the failure of a major system component would be projected for the drive unit of an orbital shuttle. And just as backup systems waited to meet such a failure so each death had waited for him to come to it. They didn't know he was alive. His enemy had simply computed what he'd do if he wasn't dead.

The only question that remained was whether they'd stuck to the three-level redundancy back-up, which was the computed optimum for automatic systems. Or had they anticipated his next move, and his next, and his next? Oddly he found that thought didn't worry him. Now he knew how it was done he could cope with it. He half hoped they did realise what would happen next. It might make them sweat a little. After all, counterattack was known to be his speciality.

He looked again at the bodies. Five private citizens of average anonymity whose ID and cash plates he now had. Since they were in no position to report the loss, the key plates would remain valid at least for a while. If he was lucky he might just be able to disappear in the most effective way known to a computer-regulated society. With one piece of physical evidence to back up the deception he could become someone else long enough to confuse the computers and maybe get off the planet.

For the moment he set aside the thought that this whole thing could be another trap and concentrated on the details of what he must do. From his medical kit he took the bio-

plastic dispenser and sprayed each man's right thumb. When they were set he carefully rolled off the tubes of artificial skin before they had a chance to bond with the natural tissue. Each one bore a thumbprint natural enough when slipped over his own thumb to fool most low-level identity scanners. Carefully he placed each artificial thumbprint in the relevant ID pack and pocketed it.

This done, he dragged the bodies into a rough pile. In the mouth of each one he poured a handful of the remaining tracer bullets. When he burned the bodies these would explode making rapid dental identification unlikely. Then he scoured the wood for dead trees and dry brush, heaping everything he could find into a crude funeral pyre.

Now it was over Keefer had no particular feelings about the men he had killed. They'd lost that was all, and he was alive. He used six incendiary pellets to set the fire. As it took hold he walked unhurriedly back through the wood towards the motorway.

Chapter Four

They had been working for several hours and even the Doctor's natural optimism was beginning to disappear. Who was it who said never confuse movement with action, he thought, as he paced backwards and forwards. He glanced across at Jerro Fanson hunched over the desk, staring blankly into the computer screen. It was a stupid aphorism; you might just as well say never confuse sitting still with thinking. And what was that legal one: anyone who represents himself in court has a fool for a client? He was a fool to think he could find a legal solution to the situation he and Leela were in. He'd be better off exploring the possibilities of escape. Movement, action, that's what they needed.

'That could be the way to go.' Fanson sat back and rubbed his eyes. 'With the right sort of publicity it could have been a major crowd-puller. A real must-see match of the day. Suppose this was all just a cunning plan. Suppose you had it in mind all along to use your fighter's peculiar attitude to killing -'

'Peculiar?' The Doctor stopped pacing and turned to glare at Fanson. Just because the world was mad it didn't follow that you had to go along with it, and anyway that wasn't the sort of statement he wanted Leela to hear go unchallenged. 'I don't call refusing to kill somebody a peculiar attitude to killing.'

'No you're right!' Fanson agreed, suddenly excited. 'It isn't about killing at all. It's about not killing. It's about not killing and getting noticed as a result.'

'And it wasn't a cunning plan,' the Doctor objected. You couldn't lie your way out of something like this, even if he was good at it, which he wasn't. In fact lying still made no real sense to him despite his best efforts to understand it and

use it, technically. A lie was the deliberate denial of a truth. How could that be anything but absurd? What a waste of memory. Let go of the truth and you would end up drowning in a sea of nonsense. One day he would step out of the TARDIS and it would be impossible to understand what he was doing, there would be cause without effect and effect without cause, there would be no reason in anything, he would never find his way back to reality. Of course reality had nothing to do with legality. Legalities, all legalities, were not about truth or lies or fairness or unfairness: they were about rules and how they were interpreted...

‘It was not a plan, not any sort of plan,’ Leela put in. ‘It just happened.’

‘Exactly,’ the Doctor said. ‘And to say it was a plan distorts the multiverse. A minor distortion but a definite distortion.’

‘Get a grip, Doctor,’ Fanson said testily. ‘I told you already - insanity is not an acceptable defence. And it doesn’t impress me anyway.’

Leela was standing with one of her wrist bands pressed against a wall scanner plate. She was once again trying to cut the band away with her knife. ‘The Doctor says living is truth so it follows that death is lying,’ she said.

‘Spare me the gnostic utterances of your agent and stop trying to outwit the security system. You’re not equipped for the job,’ Fanson said.

Leela ignored him and continued to press the point of the knife under the unyielding band.

‘Listen Doctor,’ Fanson said, ‘it doesn’t matter whether there was a cunning plan or not. The rules only require that the possibility of your having a cunning plan could exist.’

‘Regardless of the truth,’ the Doctor said.

‘Regardless of the truth,’ Fanson agreed.

‘Which is,’ the Doctor went on, ‘that there was no cunning plan; I had no cunning plan; no cunning plan existed in any way, shape or form. In terms of cunning plans I was newly arrived in this sick and perverted world. In terms of cunning plans I was a stranger in a strange land. In terms of cunning plans I was as innocent as an egg.’

‘Now you’re getting the idea,’ Fanson enthused. ‘So your cunning plan was this: your fighter deliberately engineers an unconsummated kill. You’re both arrested.’

‘Strictly speaking I was given the choice,’ the Doctor said.

Fanson shook his head. ‘You were asked: do you wish to accompany your client to the lock-up? It’s a common mistake to assume that means you have a choice.’

‘Ah,’ the Doctor said. ‘A ritual form of words. Interesting.’

‘Why?’ Leela demanded, abruptly giving up on her furiously determined assault on the wrist band. She slammed her wrist against the scanner plate, and then did it again and then again.

‘Why is it interesting?’ the Doctor asked mildly.

‘Why did the referee not mean what he said? Why was it a ritual form of words?’ She slapped the scanner plate with the flat of her hand but it was clearly no more than a gesture of frustration.

‘Politeness,’ the Doctor said. ‘Its purpose is to calm a violent situation. Some people call it good manners.’ He shrugged. ‘I call it interesting.’

‘Do you want to chat amongst yourselves or do you want to hear my brilliant plan to save your hands, feet and what pass for your brains?’ Fanson asked. ‘Because if you don’t want to listen to me I can go back to working on my own problem here.’

It suddenly struck the Doctor that for a prisoner Fanson seemed quite relaxed and remarkably unconcerned about being overheard or spied on in any way. ‘I apologise,’ the Doctor said. ‘We meant no disrespect, did we Leela?’

Leela frowned. ‘He talks much but says little. He should not be offended by interruption.’

There were times, the Doctor thought, when she seemed to go out of her way to be offensive. He smiled encouragingly at Fanson. ‘You were outlining the mythical cunning plan.’

‘Mythic possibly,’ Fanson declared. ‘This is a mythic plan. So you’re arrested. Hell breaks loose. Snot and teeth all over. The worlds and their satellites, every scuffling man and woman and all the various variations, hear about the case.’

To a man, woman and whatever, they all want to know how the rematch will play. Without breaking sweat you and your charmless fighter are interplanetary players. Only now there isn't going to be a rematch. Abrupt end of cunning plan,'

'I am charm-less because the Doctor made me give up my charms,' Leela said. 'The Doctor told me they got in the way of thought. He told me they were foolish nonsense for the superstitious and the lazy-minded.'

Fanson ignored her. 'The actions of the referee,' he went on, 'have denied you the opportunity to maximise your client's potential. It's scuffling blood-spattered brilliance - you would have made a fortune - you could have pushed her straight to Prime. You could have been somebody. She could have been a contender. You can argue agent-fighter privilege. You can argue denial of your first subsection rights under Kill Rule Two. You can argue that it wasn't an unconsummated kill but an involuntarily interrupted contest under Kill Rule Three Subsection Seven. I'm a genius. They'll fall over themselves to turn you loose. You'll be famous. You'll be rich. You'll be rich and famous. And here's the spooky part. Cunning plan which you didn't have in the first place turns out to work after all. Which means you must have had it in the first place otherwise how could it have worked so cunningly?' He was beaming with pleasure. 'You are in the presence of genius and if you feel the need to applaud, don't be embarrassed, just let yourself go.' He nodded slightly and made small, circular waves of the hand in acknowledgement of the imaginary applause.

'I'm impressed by your confidence,' the Doctor said, hoping that it was based more on expertise than on his obvious talent for salesmanship. 'And you're right I did have a plan. I planned to look for expert help and so far my plan seems to be working far better than I could have hoped.' As he expected Fanson was pleased by the shallow compliment. Also as he expected Leela was scowling and giving every impression of not being impressed. If Fanson had produced the key to the restraints, directions back to the TARDIS and a packet of sandwiches to eat on the way Leela would still not

have warmed to him. He was never going to change her basic hostility. Not that it seemed to bother him in any way. The Doctor was sure now that it was no more than he expected from her. She was a fighter. Fighters were clearly different.

‘It is still only talk,’ Leela said. ‘Pointless talk. Confident talk is usually pointless in my experience. I have known it used to persuade fools to smile at their own destruction.’

Fanson said to the Doctor, ‘I’ll print out the precedents: there are only three and only one that really counts. If this works you’re going to make history.’

‘If this works?’ Leela challenged.

Fanson continued to ignore her. ‘And you’re going to owe me.’

‘Of course,’ the Doctor agreed.

‘If this works?’ Leela repeated.

‘We are already in your debt,’ the Doctor said.

‘I thought you said you were a genius and they would fall over themselves to turn us loose,’ Leela pressed. ‘Whoever *they* are.’

‘She pays attention,’ Fanson said, ‘I’ll give her that. Even if she doesn’t understand what she hears.’

‘I understand *you*,’ Leela snarled. ‘There are men like you in every tribe. Men who offer nothing but the sound of their voice. Men who live only by the strength of others.’

Fanson was stung. ‘That’s not fair,’ he protested, addressing her directly now. ‘That is simply not fair. Without us you’d all scuffle your ugly way to an unmarked grave and you know it. You’d kill for no reason and nobody would earn or learn. Without the Guild there’d be chaos. There’d be anarchy. No one would be safe. We’d all be doomed. It would be the end of the world as we know it.’

‘It is a sure sign of stupidity when people think that the end of the world as they know it, is the end of the world as everyone knows it,’ Leela remarked.

‘She’s quoting you again, isn’t she?’ Fanson said to the Doctor. ‘What did you do, make her learn one piece of meaningless crud a day?’

‘No, she’s not quoting me,’ the Doctor said, smiling. He was not even sure that she had modified something he’d said to her as she sometimes did. So where had it come from he wondered. She couldn’t read properly yet so she couldn’t have got it from the library in the TARDIS, unless it was one of the talking books. That could be it, or it could be something she’d worked out for herself. From time to time he was struck by how remarkable Leela was and he found himself wondering how long he could put up with a travelling companion who was constantly challenging...

‘So self-generated gibberish then,’ Fanson said. He glanced back at Leela. ‘I should stick to fighting. You move better than you talk.’ He stood up and stretched clumsily. He was plump and out of condition and it was clear that his back was stiff from sitting.

Leela snorted and to stop her from stating the obvious even more obviously the Doctor said quickly, ‘I’m sure your advice will prove to be exactly what we need to know to get us out of here.’

Fanson grinned. ‘She’s right, I talk better than I move.’ Once again he looked directly at Leela. ‘That is what you were going to say?’

Leela shook her head. ‘I was going to ask why you do not use the ritual form of words which is politeness and good manners? Is it that you are not afraid because there can be no violence here?’ She held up her hands to show the wrist bands.

Fanson looked genuinely puzzled. ‘I’m a fully accredited, guild-registered agent. You’re a contract duellist.’ He shrugged and held his hands palms up in a dumb-show of blank bewilderment. He looked at the Doctor. ‘You’ll need to be careful with that one. One of these fine days she’s going to forget who she’s supposed to be fighting and why.’

‘Tell me who that is again?’ the Doctor asked, hoping Fanson might launch into another vaguely informative rant. He took care to keep his tone casual though, so that the question could be treated as a joke. ‘And the reasons?’

‘Very funny,’ Fanson said dryly. ‘Still not an acceptable defence.’

Since the traffic computer paid no more attention to pedestrians than it did to vehicles it was not controlling, Keefer’s decision to walk along the edge of the road as far as Aerospace Main offered no problems. Once there though the spaceport perimeter would present him with precisely the opposite situation. The security computers had very clear directives. Nobody crossed the ‘port boundaries on foot.

A kilometre from the first of the vehicle checks Keefer left the motorway shoulder and once more headed out across country. This time there were no woods or fields, only wide expanses of scrub criss-crossed with firebreaks.

It was an unusual and bleak landscape, which was why Jerro Fanson had proposed it as a killing ground for one of Keefer’s early fights. He had even got sponsorship deals out of a couple of low-orbit freight companies that lifted out of Aerospace Main but then the ‘port authorities had vetoed the idea. They claimed to be concerned about public safety in a designated launch-and-recovery crash zone. Keefer remembered Fanson’s furious reaction. ‘Public safety my backside!’ he had yelled. ‘Their poxy security circuits couldn’t tell a contract duellist from a sandy fort, that’s why! Couple of shots in the vicinity of a scanner and we’d be knee-deep in snatch squads rushing about shoving stun-guns up each other’s arses!’ I must thank Jerro for this idea, Keefer thought, as he pinpointed a scanner, squatted just beyond its range and reviewed what was left in his weapons belt.

He might have added: if it works, but one of his fighting strengths was that doubt had no part in his preparations. If it came at all the thought of failure followed a long way behind the action. Age and experience would gradually narrow that gap until doubt and movement happened together. A talented fighter might survive long enough to anticipate the moment and retire, but to date very few had managed it. A fight too far brought that slightest of

hesitations that lost them contests with younger, less knowledgeable duellists.

Satisfied that he had the necessary firepower, Keefer looked around for a reference marker. He chose the Lunar-Express control tower and quizzed the Ginko Navsat about his position. It took a moment or two for it to locate him within a circle of about a metre radius. That was the trouble with cheap mass-produced wrist compasses: their satellite beacons were always overloaded so the computing was slow and the accuracy less than pinpoint.

He keyed the wrist unit to record the coordinates then wrapped his duelling handgun in sprayfilm and carefully buried it. There was no way he could think of to get it onto a ship without a carrying prompt and he couldn't get one of those now. When this was all sorted out he'd come back and pick up the gun along with his career. *If* this was all sorted out. For just a moment this time the thought did come into his mind, but it made no difference to his plans and it certainly did not affect what he was about to do.

* * *

When Fanson came back from his scheduled court session there were dark shadows round his eyes and his mouth was set in a thin, grim line. 'Is your case going badly?' the Doctor asked, closing the casebook he had been consulting.

Fanson breathed a heavy sigh and sat down on the bench beside him. 'I'm not sure how bright I've been about this,' he confessed. 'I chose direct interrogation instead of a court appearance and an open pleading. I *am* innocent. They were right it was the logical choice.'

'They were right?' the Doctor asked.

Fanson glanced at him, gave a small distracted shake of the head, and went on, 'There's no chance the computer can read me any other way. But I've had a preliminary and now a supplementary and they still haven't turned me loose. Something's not scuffling right.'

'Did you tell the truth?'

Fanson smiled a half-hearted smile. 'Technically.'

‘You did not then,’ Leela said from the other side of the room where she was now trying to prise open the scanner plate. ‘What was the reason for that? There is always a reason. You cannot always spot what it is but there is always a reason.’

It was clear how low Fanson must be feeling when he answered her directly and without any sign of irritation. ‘Point is it was some sort of computer foul-up got me here in the first place. I don’t know how bad it is.’ He shook his head. ‘I don’t know how bad it is.’

He was talking to himself as much as to Leela, the Doctor could see. ‘Yet you chose to rely on this computer?’ he prompted.

‘It’s a glitch. Can’t be anything else. I *am* innocent.’

‘The computer doesn’t make mistakes. Interesting,’ the Doctor said. ‘Just this one or all of them?’

‘It’s all one and they don’t lie. They can’t lie, you know that.’

Leela prowled back across the room and stood in front of them. ‘But you can,’ she challenged. She glared at the Doctor. ‘He can lie. You know he can lie.’

Fanson was still too depressed to react. ‘Not to the computer,’ he said, shaking his head slightly as if to emphasise the impossibility of the idea. ‘The computer can’t lie and it can’t believe a lie. You can lie to other people, you can lie to yourself, but you can’t lie to the computer. The computer knows what the truth is.’

‘Perhaps you’re lying to yourself then?’ the Doctor suggested. ‘Have you thought of that possibility?’

Fanson rallied at last. ‘I’m innocent, not crazy.’ He looked at the Doctor suspiciously. ‘You’re not a plant are you? They haven’t put you in here to convince me that I did it have they?’

‘This computer,’ Leela asked the Doctor, ‘is this like the god of the Tesh?’

‘No,’ the Doctor said. ‘These are just machines. Merely machines,’ he corrected himself. Whether they were just or

unjust machines remained to be seen. All that could be said with certainty was that they were dominant in this society.

‘Then why does he listen to it and do what it says?’

‘It’s the law, it seems,’ the Doctor explained.

‘Why are you discussing me as though I’m not here?’ Fanson demanded.

Leela ignored him. ‘What was it you told me: if it looks like a duck, and it walks like a duck and it quacks like a duck.’

‘It’s probably a duck,’ the Doctor said.

Leela shrugged, ‘So if it speaks like a god, and he treats it like a god, and it rules him like a god would rule him...?’ Leela offered.

‘It’s probably not a duck,’ the Doctor said and beamed at her. When he had told her that tired old duck routine, which he had always found quite amusing, he had not even been sure she had understood the basic point. And she had never seen a duck to the best of his recollection. But here she was adapting the argument to make a point of her own. She was getting quite sophisticated in her thinking. He really must try not to underestimate her.

‘Enough of this,’ Fanson declared. ‘Let’s get to the gore.’

‘Get to the gore?’ Leela asked.

‘A colloquialism meaning let’s get on with it, I imagine,’ the Doctor suggested. ‘*A nos moutons*, cut to the chase...?’

‘You never stop talking do you,’ Fanson commented. ‘And a good chunk of it doesn’t make any sense at all.’ It was not a criticism. ‘You’re a natural. If fighting comes as naturally to her, you’re going to be huge one of these fine days.’

‘We have to get out of here first,’ the Doctor said.

‘When you do, and if I haven’t, I want you to do something for me.’ Fanson’s expression had become earnest, too earnest to be entirely convincing. He leaned closer and looked the Doctor directly in the eye. ‘A favour?’

The Doctor could not help smiling at the blatant effort to manipulate him, but he had said he and Leela were in his debt and he had meant it. ‘Yes?’ He had meant it at the time.

Fanson’s expression did not change. ‘Find Keefer, find my fighter. Tell him what’s going on.’

He had meant it at the time but this was potentially a bigger favour than the Doctor had in mind and a commitment he was not anxious to make. 'Tell him what's going on? I'm not sure I know what that is,' he said hoping that Fanson might take the hint. It was, he realised immediately, a forlorn hope.

'Tell him there's something wrong,' Fanson said. 'Tell him I think there might be someone out to get us. Someone major. Someone with serious contacts,' he dropped his voice slightly as though he had only just realised what that might mean. 'I'm talking a big player. Warn Keefer to keep his head down.'

'Why should we do that?' Leela demanded.

'Because I helped you. Because we're...' For once he seemed genuinely at a loss for words.

'Because we're in this together,' the Doctor said. 'We'll do our best.'

'I need your promise,' Fanson said.

The Doctor nodded. 'I promise we'll do our best.'

Fanson was not satisfied. 'Your word as an agent, on the life of your fighter?' he pressed.

'No one swears on my life,' Leela interrupted angrily. 'It is my life and mine alone. No one swears on my life except me.'

'Then I want *your* word,' Fanson said and, when Leela remained silent, he added, 'Gratitude not one of your strengths then.'

'I will give you my word as a warrior,' Leela said, her voice cold and flat, 'we will find this Keefer and warn him.'

Fanson smiled cheerfully. 'Good enough,' he said and stood up and stretched.

Watching him the Doctor got the distinct impression that Fanson was pleased with himself and the way things had just gone. He probably saw this as a successful negotiation, or possibly as a successful con. As far as the Doctor was concerned it could have been either.

'Do you want to rehearse your open court arguments?' Fanson offered. 'I'll stand in for the referee.'

'Why not?' the Doctor said. 'You can never be too well prepared.'

Fanson sat down on the edge of the workstation and folded his arms. 'In the arena,' he intoned, 'only the fundamental kill rules apply. This is a sacred trust of which I am the sole trustee.'

'I object,' the Doctor protested. He stood up and pulled his hat from his pocket and jammed it on his head. Then he put his hands round the lapels of his coat and grasped them lightly in the best courtroom manner. He had often thought that the wig and gown worn in certain eras and jurisdictions on Earth were rather appealing. 'I object,' he repeated. If he had realised this was going to happen he might even have been able to find some appropriate legal robes in one of the wardrobe rooms of the TARDIS. 'As a material witness and a direct participant I challenge your right to sit in authority here.'

'No,' said Fanson. 'No, no, no. You must remember Doctor "challenge" is not a word to be used lightly. He could take it as a legal justification to kill you right there, right then.'

Despite the fact that he had been studying case law and listening to detailed advice from Fanson, the Doctor still could not quite believe what he was hearing. This was a technologically advanced society whose attitude to killing didn't seem to have got beyond the stone-axe stage. And they had what appeared to be a sophisticated legal system entirely devoted to deciding who could hit whom, when and with what. 'I won't be armed,' he said, rather lamely.

Fanson nodded. 'Which is a very good reason not to take the chance of using words like challenge. And take that thing off your head;

'My hat? What's wrong with my hat?'

'It looks ridiculous.'

The Doctor took his hat off and turned it around in his hands, shaping it and dusting it off 'It so happens,' he said, 'this a particularly fine fedora.' He put it back on top of his untidy mop of hair. 'It has been admired across the galaxies. Universally admired.'

'The court could take it as an insult. You really do not want them to take anything about you as an insult.'

The Doctor smiled broadly. 'Don't tell me, let me guess. It would be a legal justification for killing me right there, right then?'

'It could lead to a challenge that you might find it difficult to avoid,' Fanson explained patiently, obviously stating the obvious.

This is madness, the Doctor thought. I've let myself be talked into accepting this primitive nonsense as if it were normal and now I am actually trying to fit in with it. I'm trying to work my way through a system devised by homicidal maniacs to accommodate their insanity. But before he could voice any of this, the rehearsal was abruptly interrupted by a proximity speaker. 'Subject Jerro Fanson will attend a final assessment in Interrogation Suite Seven,' it whispered with chilling clarity. 'The Interrogation Controller will be in attendance momentarily.'

Fanson got to his feet. The colour was draining from his face and for a moment he looked unsteady. 'That was quick,' he said forcing a smile. 'They must have sorted out the glitch.'

'What happens if you refuse to attend?' the Doctor asked.

Fanson rubbed the wrist bands. 'There's a time limit on these now.' He was still pale but he was steady now. 'They'll have sorted out that scuffling glitch.' He started to walk away. 'I'll be out before you are,' he said without looking back.

Chapter Five

In the Aerospace Main's surveillance suite the Shift Controller watched Sita Benovides out of the corner of his eye and wondered idly what pulling rank would do to his chances. He had made a couple of jokey references to her prospects in 'port security if she 'got close to the right people and made the... right connections' but she didn't seem to understand or else she chose not to.

She was younger than the other squad leaders and there was something about her cropped, black hair and slim, almost boyish figure that he found particularly appealing. Skin like cream satin, he thought, picturing it taut over supple swells and curves... He shifted in his chair. Perhaps it was time to *make* her understand.

What the Shift Controller did not understand was that Sita was already close to the right people, if not quite in the way he had in mind. In fact she comfortably outranked him. Any trouble and his prospects in 'port security were not promising. As it happened his prospects for walking were not good either since she planned to break both his legs if he ever got up the nerve to put a hand on her.

The first warning light, indicating a possible intruder crossing the edge of the outer scan zone in Sector 4 Grid 4 by 3, did not interrupt the Shift Controller's reverie. Normally this would not have been important. Almost invariably the alarm sequences were triggered by animals, feral dogs and cats mainly, and the computer usually identified and discounted such targets as they moved further into the zone and presented more reliable data. This one was the correct height and moving in the right way to register a high probability that it was just such a false alarm.

Nevertheless the Shift Controller should have keyed his acknowledgement of the first warning, thus recording his

awareness and vigilance. In the subsequent enquiry into the perimeter security procedures at Aerospace Main his failure to do so, the Commission decided quite unfairly, was what caused all the problems that followed.

Keefer had watched the dog in the distance quartering the firebreaks as it hunted mice and other small prey, and he had immediately added it to his strategy. Security would probably be used to the animals, he realised, and while the system was operating on crude data he could use that familiarity to move closer in and get a better line on the scanners without setting off major alarms.

Once the shallow trench was finished and he was satisfied with it he set off. He crouched low to the ground and, moving back and forth as he had seen the dog doing, he crossed into the outer zone of the security perimeter.

When he had penetrated a few metres in he dropped flat and, keeping his movements to a slow, smooth minimum, laid out the weapons in sequence on the ground beside him. That done, he carefully checked the sighting for the three rapid bursts of fire he would need to make with the small rapid-fire pistol he carried, but seldom used in the normal run of fights. Finally he set it for tracer, flicked off the safety and began his pre-fight concentration exercise.

In the surveillance suite the first warning light had cancelled itself, unremarked except by the machine log, which noticed and recorded every variation from the norm. When the second light came up the supervisor spotted it immediately. Even using crude data the computer had no difficulty in interpreting the intruder as:

not-canine:	subset not-feral subset not-domestic
not-feline:	subset not-feral subset not-domestic
not-bird:	subset not-carrion

and so on through an exhaustive list of possible false alarms. It had a small problem resolving the conflict between *dog - no alarm/cancel indicator* and *not-dog - activate indicator/prepare alarm* sequentially occupying exactly the same space in the scanner map, which reduced the threat probability and delayed the initial alarm. But this was largely academic since Keefer was about to bring the sky down on 'port security.

The Court of Attack lock-up was an unusual cell block in many ways, not least because there was never any sign of the jailers. Food and welfare, information, instructions and discipline were all delivered or administered automatically or remotely.

There was something peculiarly threatening about such a totally impersonal regime, the Doctor thought. There was no point of human contact so there was no point of reference. They could have been the boxed playthings of a giant child. If you weren't concentrating you could lose your hold on reality and never get it back. It was because there was no one to face, no one to confront and to blame, no one to question, if it came to that. They existed at the whim of unseen power. They were like uneducated primitives living in superstitious awe of a world they could not understand or begin to control. And yet Leela had recognised the danger and resisted it immediately. She had known what he himself was only just beginning to realise: the importance of keeping everything personal. He watched her now as she prowled about trying to spot the directional voice devices that produced the proximity whispers. She had no real idea what it was she was looking for except that it was something physical and man-made rather than a disembodied supernatural force. She had the knife out again and was obviously planning to wreak some sort of symbolic vengeance on any likely-looking device that she came across. It was a pointless exercise if you looked at it logically but how else did you face up to the faceless? How else did you resist the irresistible? Logically you didn't. But what she lacked in logic she always made up for in sheer

determination and simple bloody-mindedness. 'I wonder what's happened to our friend Fanson,' he said.

'He is not *my* friend,' Leela said.

Yes, simple bloody-mindedness was always in evidence, the Doctor thought. 'A figure of speech,' he said. 'He seems to have been gone longer this time. Hard to tell whether that's a good sign for him.'

'It is hard to care,' Leela said, poking the knife point into a small gap at the back of the workstation where Fanson had been sitting when he got the whispered summons.

'Maybe I can get some information from the computer,' the Doctor said. 'Assuming you're not planning to attack the terminal next.' It was likely that all the outcomes of all the cases in all the Courts of Attack would be recorded on the universal computer database, he thought. And presumably the process would be more or less instantaneous. But then he found himself wondering how much he really wanted to know about what had happened to Fanson.

'Do you think they are watching us?' Leela asked.

'They?'

'Our captors.'

'Oh that they,' the Doctor said. 'I imagine so.' He smiled suddenly and vividly. 'Smile for the camera. Hold the knife up so that everyone can see it. Perhaps we can order some prints to send home to the tribe.' There was natural resistance and there was stupidity, and on reflection Leela was straying towards natural stupidity.

'You are talking strangely again, Doctor,' Leela said frowning at him. 'Is it as before? Are you feeling sick?'

Before the Doctor could point out to her that he was merely trying to get her attention away from abusing the fixtures and fittings and back to the reality of their situation, the reality of their situation changed abruptly.

The prisoner Leela and her contract-registered agent will report to the Court of Attack in one hour for open pleading and judgement before the High Referee of Duel and the Panel of Fight Replay,' a voice whispered with eerie clarity, as

though the words had been breathed closely and directly into the Doctor's ear.

'Open pleading?' Leela said suspiciously. 'I will not plead for my life. I will not plead with these skulking cowards.'

'Don't worry,' the Doctor said. 'I think that's what I'm supposed to do.'

With a show of defiance Leela said loudly, 'The judgement of these people means nothing.'

'Unless it's in our favour of course,' the Doctor said.

'Guilty? What guilty? What are you talking about?' Fanson recognised a joke when he saw one but this was no time for humour. 'That is not funny! This is not right, you know. This is not what's supposed to happen.'

'You have the right to review the relevant sections of the examination record,' said the Interrogation Controller, who showed no sign of smiling but was clearly pleased with himself.

Maybe not a joke then, Fanson thought. So *what?* Another shakedown? Yeah, could be another shakedown. Aloud he said: 'I'm not what you'd call a rich man, gods I'm not what anybody'd call a rich man, but I do have access to a little money. A little cash money...?'

'You're not offering me a bribe are you?'

Fanson tried for a wry smile. 'Not necessarily,' he said and found that for some reason he couldn't quite set his face in the desired expression.

The Interrogation Controller shook his head slightly. 'It's a pity this is such an uncomplicated case,' he said. 'I could have made a full subroutine out of a bribe offer. Classic first-level corroboration.'

Classic computer service ratcrud thought Fanson, who was now at a loss to know what his next move should be. It wasn't supposed to happen like this. Wait and see looked like his only option. One thing was for sure though: whatever this was all about it was going to get obvious pretty scuffling fast. Gods if it had been for real it would be over and done in double-quick time.

The possibility that it was for real still did not really occur to him, not for a moment. It was too unreal to contemplate...

Once again the Doctor was almost impressed. He and Leela had set out walking into the bright white corridors of the lock-up complex with no idea where the courtroom they had been summoned to might actually be situated. The whole place seemed deserted. There was still no sign of any jailers and the occasional prisoner they did glimpse on the way through disappeared into their private quarters at the first hint that the Doctor might be planning to speak to them. There were no signposts or map boards, no directional arrows, no whispered instructions from proximity speakers; there was nothing to show them where they were supposed to go. What there was, however, was a clear indication of where they were *not* supposed to go. Each time they moved away from the correct direction their wrist and ankle bands began to tighten. The longer and further they strayed the tighter the bands became and the only way they could ease them was to go back into the permitted area of movement. Within this unrestricted zone the Doctor reasoned must be the courtroom they were seeking and to find it all they had to do was to keep moving. It was a process of trial and error not unlike the ones he had seen used by simple maze-solving automata.

Although she had probably worked out what was happening almost as soon as the Doctor had himself, and well before he decided to explain it to her anyway, Leela of course stubbornly resisted the system. The Doctor had expected this, though that didn't make it any less irritating as he stood waiting at one of the junctions in the corridors, while she pressed on down what was obviously the wrong route. 'It would be sensible,' he said, trying to keep the annoyance out of his voice and thus avoid provoking her into further self-destructive defiance, 'to save pushing the limits of the system until we need an escape plan. And we won't need one of those until after the court has ruled.'

‘That may be too late,’ Leela called back from the bend in the corridor she had reached. She peered round it, took a half step forward, hesitated for a moment and then turned and came trotting back to where the Doctor was waiting with his hands stuck in his trouser pockets and his face set in an expression of casual unconcern, which he certainly didn’t feel. At this moment he couldn’t see much purpose in all the tutoring he planned to give her when there was time; not to mention all the casual good sense she could pick up in passing from the accumulated wisdom of his many experiences and incarnations if she would only stop behaving like a rampaging primitive with all the calculating self-discipline of a mindlessly violent savage. ‘We should be getting on,’ he said. ‘We are working to a deadline.’

He started to walk on towards the court, responding now to quite small guide prompts from his wrist bands. It almost felt as if he was being led by the hand, he thought, though Leela clearly regarded it as being dragged by the scruff of the neck.

‘There is a door round that corner that leads to the outside,’ Leela said. ‘I thought the bands might not work if you could reach the outside.’

‘Unlikely,’ the Doctor grunted, lengthening his stride.

Leela jogged along beside him. ‘It was a theory,’ she said. ‘And you told me that a theory is useless unless it can be tested.’

‘Did I say that?’

‘But I could not reach the outside so I could not test it.’ She rubbed her wrist and held her hand up so that he could see the blood on it.

The Doctor stopped and took her hands in his and examined the wrists. There were trickles of blood from under the edges of the bands but the injuries did not look to him to be too serious. Her ankles did not seem to be bleeding. He sighed resignedly. ‘Is there any chance you might stop doing things like this?’ he asked. He took out a large white handkerchief from the pocket of his coat and wiped the blood from her wrists. ‘At least until it’s absolutely necessary.’

‘I thought it was absolutely necessary.’

'You were mistaken.' The Doctor pocketed the bloody handkerchief and walked on more slowly. Reaching another anonymous fork in the corridor he felt the slightest of twitches in the wrist and ankle bands as he moved to take the left fork and so turned instead into the right-hand corridor. There he paused and waited for Leela to take the wrong direction again. This time, however, she followed his lead. For some reason he couldn't quite justify he found this even more irritating than what she had been doing. Why couldn't she have simply followed his lead from the beginning? Was she deliberately setting out to annoy him? Of course she was. He sighed again. Of course she wasn't. It seemed he was more nervous about the approaching trial than he had realised. The trouble was he didn't know enough about what he was doing to be confident doing it...

Keefer was calm and sharp and ready to set his plan in motion.

The first and briefest burst of tracers burnt out the scanner that was registering his presence. A second, slightly longer burst hosed across the faces of four scanners ranged down the perimeter to his left. The overloads on the delicate detectors were immediate and devastating. That section of the perimeter was instantly blind, deaf and registering the possibility of major terrorist infiltration.

He emptied the rest of the magazine in a sustained burst down the perimeter to his right. This took out two scanners directly and crippled another five. The possibility of terrorist attack was uprated to probability.

Keefer reloaded the pistol with explosive shells each set on a delay. He fired these in a random pattern through the perimeter and then matched the pattern with smoke shells.

As he ran back towards his prepared trench he fired a final clip of incendiary pellets into the shrub, setting as many separate fires as possible. By the time he lay down in the trench and began to cover himself he had transformed the area into the beginnings of a fairly convincing battlefield.

The Court of Attack was a semi-circular chamber under a lofty, opaque-glass half dome. In the tall-backed centre chair of an elevated curved tier of nine seats the High Referee and Senior Umpire of Duel sat flanked on either side by the eight members of the Panel of Fight Replay. All nine were dressed in black uniforms with high, soft grey collars buttoned tightly under the chin. The Doctor recognised the High Referee as the small, dapper man who had had them arrested, and the courtroom itself as a symbolic version of the sacred arena sliced precisely in half.

Presumably bisecting it had some deeply symbolic significance, but for the moment the Doctor couldn't work out what that might be. He also couldn't work out how Jerro Fanson's imaginative and imaginary scenario was supposed to have worked in this place. The defence's case, his insufficiently reasoned and not-very-practised argument, depended for its effect on the claim that there would have been a surge of amazed and horrified interest among the duelling aficionados, which in its turn would have generated a tidal wave of worldwide publicity, which in its turn would have made the Doctor and Leela rich and famous. But there were only eleven people present, counting them. There were no observers, no court stenographers, no prosecuting counsel, no members of any sort of press corps that he could see... To the Doctor this looked a lot more like a secret military tribunal than a public trial. And secret military tribunals did not, in his experience, lend themselves readily to tidal waves of publicity. It looked as though his uncertain grasp of the finer points of legal argument might not be as important as he had thought.

'You have fought only half your fight,' the High Referee announced when Leela and the Doctor had made their way to the two empty chairs in the centre of the floor and were standing behind them looking up at the members of the court. 'You have been brought before us solemnly to face the second half of your duel.'

‘Ah,’ the Doctor murmured. So that’s the significance of the half arena, he thought. Either that or it was a routine rationalisation of a poor piece of architectural design.

‘The Rules of Attack,’ the High Referee went on, ‘have been brought into doubt and question by your moves and by your reactions. Here in this Court of Attack we must seek to identify the rule, to understand the rule, to make firm the rule, so that the death that is sought for and is fought for is not cruel nor is it arbitrary nor is it unlawful but is according to the universal rule. You may be seated.’

‘I will stand,’ Leela said immediately.

‘My client would prefer to stand if that’s all right with you,’ the Doctor said, smiling in what he hoped was a friendly and non-challenging way. Legal arguments might be a waste of time but there was no point in deliberately stirring up the senior psychopath and all the assistant psychopaths. On the other hand it was important to look relaxed. ‘I on the other hand,’ he said, still smiling warmly, ‘would prefer to sit down if that’s acceptable to the court.’ Sitting he knew would of course put him in an even weaker position than standing looking upwards, which was in itself intended to give the members of the court dominance over accused prisoners. Sometimes though, the Doctor had found, the only way to avoid an unavoidable manoeuvre was to accept and exaggerate it. He sat down in one of the chairs and stretched out his legs and crossed his ankles. As an afterthought he put his hands behind his head and leaned back slightly. ‘That’s better,’ he said. ‘It’s difficult to look up constantly without getting a crick in the neck, I find.’ He widened his smile until it was at its most vividly beaming. ‘If everybody’s comfortable why don’t we begin?’

‘The Fight Replay Panel will present the record of its findings,’ the High Referee said.

‘Present findings?’ the Doctor objected without moving. ‘I object, your refereeness, or should that be your refereeship? Or just ref? What is the correct form of address? Is it ump? I’m new to this and I wouldn’t want to give offence to the court.’

‘You will not address the Court of Attack until you are bidden to do so,’ the High Referee said. ‘And you will not address the High Referee and Senior Umpire at all unless responding directly to a question or an instruction.’

‘I understand,’ the Doctor said.

‘The Fight Replay Panel will present the record of its findings,’ the High Referee repeated.

‘I object,’ the Doctor said. ‘How can findings be presented when no evidence has been heard?’

‘The Fight Replay Panel will present the record of its findings,’ the High Referee persisted in an even tone. ‘Findings will be replayed and reviewed, action and reaction, move and countermove will be put to analysis, analysis will be assessed, assessment shall be agreed. The Rules of Attack must and will be satisfied. Is the Fight Replay Panel present and ready to present the record of its findings?’

‘It is present; the eight men replied in unison. ‘And ready to present the record of its findings.’

‘The record of the findings of the Fight Replay Panel are accepted,’ the High Referee intoned solemnly.

‘I object,’ the Doctor said. ‘Defence does not have a copy.’

The High Referee was finally annoyed it seemed. He glared at the Doctor. ‘Are you trying to insult the Court?’ he hissed.

The Doctor was suddenly conscious of the two ceremonial handguns that hung in ornate holsters from the arms of the High Referee’s chair. At least he had assumed up until now that they were ceremonial. The way the man was leaning forward and resting his hands on the guns seemed to suggest to the Doctor that he might have misunderstood their purpose. ‘I’m trying to defend my client,’ he said getting slowly to his feet. ‘Which I believe is my right under agent-fighter privilege and which I hope to argue is part of our first and second subsection rights under Kill Rule Two.’

The High Referee took his hands from the guns and sat back in his chair. ‘Rule Two, first and second subsections,’ he said. He thought for a moment then said, ‘In due time. First the record of the findings.’

'It is behind you, Doctor,' Leela said quietly before the Doctor could object again. The record of the findings they talk of is behind you.' She was looking back at the flat wall that was the diameter slice across the half arena.

The Doctor turned his head. The door through which they had entered the room had disappeared. Within the high wall Leela was fighting the security man, over and over again, normal speed, slow motion, stop-frame, from every side and every angle, close up and long shot. No movement, no facial expression had been missed by the cameras in the arena. From any and every angle the fight was short and expertly brutal. The Doctor looked at Leela watching herself. He saw to his dismay that she was smiling.

Every alarm in the surveillance suite was going crazy. As last as the Shift Controller acknowledged and cancelled one, another klaxon would set up its electronic howl. There was no time to interrogate the system at each stage and get a reasoned analysis and some weighted options to choose from.

Three snatch squads were already scrambled and en route but it looked as though more would be needed. The problem was major and escalating; the question was why? And there was the possibility that this was just a feint to pull all Security's resources to one section so that the main thrust could be mounted in another. What main thrust though? Who were these people?

It suddenly occurred to the Shift Controller that it might be a drill. Oh no, supposing it's a drill, he thought. If it's a drill this is a test and if this is a test then I'm failing it. What should he do? Where was scuffling computer back-up when you needed it? He hadn't got vision from the intercept 'copters, he hadn't got anything. How was he supposed to make decisions under these conditions! He keyed Snatch One communications. 'Snatch One, Snatch One?'

'Snatch One aye.'

'Where are my pictures Snatch One?'

'We're only just airborne Control. There's nothing to see.'

'Kick it Snatch One! I'm blind and deaf here!'

The warning board lit up again and all the cancelled klaxons reactivated. The computer was clearly too subtle to cope with the sort of input it was getting. Suddenly Sita Benovides was at the controller's elbow. 'Are you going to scramble us or not?'

'You're in reserve,' he snapped, all hopes of getting his hands on her body quite forgotten.

'For what?' she demanded, raising her voice above the cacophony. 'You expecting them to come up the back stairs and tap you on the shoulder?'

'I don't know what I'm expecting!' he shouted.

'That much is obvious!' she shouted back. 'So I suppose a decision's out of the question?'

'Get back to your squad and wait.'

'We've been waiting!'

'Wait some more!'

Keefer could hear the jet-copters coming. He lay in the shallow grave, breathing lightly through the thin tube he had pushed up into the air. All his concentration was focused on his hearing; his other senses could have no relevant input and he had excluded them as soon as he was sure the earth had covered him completely. He judged the 'copters were still some way off but well within visual range when the first of the explosive shells detonated. He heard the change of engine note as the pilots threw the machines into standard evasion manoeuvres, breaking left and right to flank the hostile positions.

The Shift Controller could not believe what he was seeing, or at least what he was almost seeing. 'Snatch One, vision's all over the place!'

'We seem to be under fire, Control,' the squad leader's voice was tinged with panic. 'We're approaching four, four by three from the right flank. Snatch Two and Three are on the left. There's a lot of smoke. Whoever's firing is on the move. Can you see?'

As the 'copter banked and weaved the controller's screen showed glimpses of smoke and what looked like muzzle flashes. Look at it! Look at that! He had to make a decision. He couldn't delay any longer. He had to make up his mind. The tension was becoming an almost physical ache. He had to decide. What to do? What should he do? It was a sort of relief to let go and punch up the squad room and shout an order: 'Snatch Four!' he yelled.

Sita Benovides smirked out of the screen at him. 'Snatch Four aye!'

Somehow the decision overwhelmed him now and gathered pace, carrying him along, making thought unnecessary. All squad members draw full antipersonnel weapons. Ride is gun-ship four-oh.' That wiped the smile off her face.

'Are you serious?' she demanded.

'Move it, Benovides!'

'Gun-ship?'

'Authorise seven zero seven.'

'Full antipersonnel - are you crazy?'

'Sector Four is now a Kill Zone.'

'You've got three squads out there!'

'I'm pulling them back. Hit it Benovides!' For one brief moment it looked as though she might defy him. 'That's an order, Squad Leader!' he said loudly and firmly.

Snatch Squads One, Two and Three dropped from the 'copters at precisely the same time. They hit the ground running and immediately fanned out so that they could link up as they had practised time and again in training exercises. The idea was to surround intruders and cut them off from any possible escape routes.

Each squad member wore a helmet fitted with standard imaging and guidance displays, and light body armour under a vivid yellow uniform. They carried medium-range stun-guns, which were effective up to fifty metres. Above that distance the guns delivered only a painful jolt. Below fifty metres, but set on maximum output, the guns ceased merely to incapacitate and became crippling, sometimes lethal. It

was routine for the kill freaks to jam the power settings so they were stuck permanently on maximum and if anybody ever got too close... well scuffle their horrible trouble-making luck.

As they approached the breached section of the perimeter the chemical smoke and burning brush made it increasingly difficult for the squads to maintain contact. Imaging and guidance became unreliable and once in among the fires individual squad members began to lose sight of each other. The first stage of Keefer's plan was working.

Fanson stared at the Judicial Therapist. He couldn't believe what was happening to him. 'But I didn't do it,' he protested weakly. 'I really didn't do it. I didn't kill Mickey.'

'There is nothing to be gained by a denial now,' said the Therapist gravely.

'I never left my office.'

'And that is the truth as you see it?'

'That is the truth as I see it, the truth as I remember it, the truth as I know it, it's the scuffling truth!' yelled Fanson.

The Therapist smiled. 'You lose your temper easily. Could you kill in a rage like that?'

'Why don't you ask the computer,' said Fanson subsiding again.

The Therapist swivelled a small screen towards him. 'You have already been shown the computer's assessment,' he said, 'but if you wish you may see it again.'

'What for? It's crud. From beginning to end its scuffling crud. I don't know who or how but somebody's shafted that machine.'

'I find your continual use of crude language quite significant,' said the Therapist thoughtfully. 'How do you feel about it?'

'You're joking,' said Fanson.

'No.'

'Crude language?' The urge to laugh pushed at the back of Fanson's throat.

The Therapist leaned forward slightly. 'Are there any other crudenesses, images of bodily functions perhaps, which come to your mind when you think of what's happening to you?'

'There is one,' said Fanson.

The Therapist sensed a breakthrough. His private studies were paying off at last. His conviction that judicial therapists should be more than formal officers of the court, more than low-grade computer technicians, was about to be vindicated. 'Yes?' he urged, his eyes bright with evangelical fervour. 'What is the image?'

Fanson stared at him in silence.

'The image. What does it relate to? You must tell me!'

'If you insist. It relates to you.'

'Me?'

Fanson nodded. 'I think you're a scuffling arse,' he said flatly. 'Now why don't you just do what you're paid to do and press the buttons.'

'I'm sorry for you,' said the Therapist coldly.

'We can agree on something then. I'm sorry for me too.' Fanson felt the moulded head and neck restraints slip into place and then felt his scalp prickle as the Therapist activated the control board and thousands of microscopic needles slipped into the skin of his head and neck from the flexible webbing that had shaped itself to the contours of his skull.

The Therapist balanced the feedback from the thousands of electrical contacts. 'You are responsible for the death of Jon Michaelson. Your inability to accept the truth has been registered as a level ten psychosis. As prescribed by law in Section Eight Paragraph One of the Penal Medical Code you will undergo total restructuring. The cost of this treatment and all subsequent retraining will be met by the state.'

Terror shot through Fanson at last, paralysing his lungs. Retraining! Retraining for what? To be able to feed himself and keep himself clean. So he wouldn't quite be a vegetable. But near enough. Jerro Fanson would be gone, gone for good, gone forever, gone. Dead. He would be dead and gone, forgotten, never known. He struggled for a last moment's

dignity, but his body betrayed him. 'I've pissed myself,' he whispered.

'There's no need to be afraid,' said the Therapist. 'There will be no pain.'

As the computer took control of the treatment and began to feed delicate patterns of annihilating current through the needles, Fanson fought to think. Last words. Last words of Jerro Fanson. Say something. One final word before I leave, folks. He was slipping it was too late too late too... 'Keefer,' said Jerro Fanson in a murmur that was barely audible but that echoed loud and strong through his collapsing mind. 'Kill them gaudy, Keefer.'

And then he was gone.

Chapter Six

'The duel was valid up until that point,' the High Referee said. 'It was a spot challenge, notified within the rules as codified in Appendix 17 of Kill Rule One.'

In the wall Jarvis, the security man, pressed the Doctor again. 'There's no reason to wait. The systems are recording. All the legalities are in place. You must fight me. You have no choice.'

The Doctor watched himself smile and stick both hands into his trouser pockets and say to the man, 'There's always a choice.' It was definitely unaggressive, he decided, passive even but there was something a bit smug about it. Smugness can be passive and aggressive at the same time. Was he being passive-aggressive? Another saying, from one of those holy books that held so much sway on Earth, drifted into his mind: the soft answer turneth away wrath. Nice simple idea, he thought, probably a bit too simple.

Again Jarvis loosened the handgun in its holster and repeated, 'You must fight me. You have no choice.'

And then Leela stepped in between them and said, 'Yes he has.'

'The challenge was accepted,' the High Referee went on, 'as codified in Appendix 17 and re-codified in Subsection 27 and is defined as a Diverted Acceptance.'

In the wall the confrontation was repeated from another angle: 'There's no reason to wait. The systems are recording. All the legalities are in place. You must fight me. You have no choice.' 'There's always a choice.' 'You must fight me. You have no choice.'

'Yes he has.'

Again and again the confrontation was repeated from different angles and sightlines, around and around the three protagonists, until it seemed to the Doctor that the words

began to be stripped of meaning. What began as nonsense was becoming gibberish...

'If it will assist the court,' he said finally, turning back to face the members of the tribunal, 'the defence accepts that the challenge was made and accepted according to the law. We are ready to move on to what happens next.'

The gun-ship was poised to go when Sita led her squad across the lift-off platform towards it. The pilot gestured urgently for her to get a move on but she ignored him. They were not exactly hustling and she had no intention that they should. They moved at a regulation trot, their multifunction riot guns holstered, muzzle down, across their backs. This had all the signs of becoming a major scuffle-up and at that moment all she could think of to minimise the likely damage was to delay things as much as possible without actually provoking a direct confrontation with the Shift Controller. The moron might yet make it necessary for her to identify herself and countermand his orders. But to do it she would have to disobey her own orders and the longer she could delay taking that decision the better. If the scuffwit had made up his mind sooner she wouldn't have this problem.

Keefer heard the ragged line of people coming towards him. By the time they passed him they were already on full helmet intercom routines and it was clear from the muttered exchanges that these were now their only links with each other. Someone paused just beyond where Keefer was lying. He could place the position but nothing more. There was no way to be certain what direction they were facing or how completely the smoke was isolating them.

Keefer sucked in a full breath through the tube and raised the level of his other senses. Earth pressed and scratched his face. Acrid smoke bit at his throat and filled the back of his nostrils. The blackness beyond his eyelids was total but flickered with patterns of blood. This was the moment of maximum risk. The icy calm of combat took Keefer's mind

again as he pushed up through the loose earth and rolled out of the trench.

The man was standing maybe a metre away peering through the smoke. He was swinging a stun-gun uncertainly from side to side, waiting for something to move in front of him. Keefer rose to his feet behind him and stepped forward. As the man began to turn Keefer hit him below the edge of the helmet just where the neck and the side point of the jaw were unprotected. He fell heavily. Quickly Keefer stripped him of his uniform and body armour and put them on over his own clothes. They were on the large side and he was making adjustments to the equipment harness and checking over the stun-gun when the man began to regain consciousness. Keefer unjammed the maximum setting on the gun and fed him a couple of minimum jolts: enough to keep him out of it for a while. Then he strode on through the smoke, heading for where he estimated the others would have stumbled to by now.

The instruction to regroup and fall back to the 'copters came over his helmet speaker almost immediately. The squad leader choked off the inevitable questions and grumbles with an abrupt: 'Get your arse back or you're on your own!'

On Keefer's helmet visor the 'copter's homing signal activated a guidance grid. He turned and followed its directions, moving slowly enough to allow the others to catch up with him. As soon as figures began to trot out of the smoke around him he picked up his pace.

'Scuffling move it!'

'There's a crap-storm coming!'

'Carry One, where's the scuffling beacon?'

The command circuits, boosted by the jet-copters' power units as the squad leaders got closer to them, were beginning to overlap. Keefer noted with grim satisfaction that Jerro's estimate of their behaviour under pressure was not far wrong. Even their communications discipline was shot.

So it was that in the scramble to load up and get out, all that mattered to anyone was that each 'copter had a full squad on board. No one cared much whether the right squad

members were on the right vehicles, let alone whether the right squad members were in the uniforms.

Sita was hugely relieved when she heard the confirmation that all the squads were airborne and accounted for. She even enjoyed the passes the gun-ship made across the area, strafing methodically, laying down an unsurvivable patchwork of fire.

She shouted: 'Eat blast and die screaming you murderous scum,' and grinned at the gun-ship pilot, who did not appreciate the joke.

The Shift Controller was less relieved to hear that the squads had found no one while they were on the ground. 'Maintain operational readiness!' he yelled over the command control net. 'Return to base on full stand-by!' He knew now that it had been a feint, or an exercise, but either way he needed those squads back and ready to scramble.

'I have ignored the fact that the de facto referee had called for a halt,' the Doctor said, now that he had finally been given the floor. 'Nobody move was, I think, the phrase he used.'

In the wall behind him the sacred arena reappeared and the replay of the moment he referred to began its multi-version sequence. 'Nobody move!' the voice on the PA ordered. 'I'm coming to sort this out.' 'Do you accept the challenge?' Jarvis muttered to the Doctor who picked out a green jelly baby, put the bag back into his coat pocket and said round a mouthful of sweet, 'Aren't we supposed to wait?'

The Doctor did not look at the wall as the next version and the next ground on and on. Even Leela had become tired of watching herself. She had sat down in one of the chairs and was staring up at the nine members of the court with undisguised hostility. It had been bothering the Doctor that if her pride got the better of her she might do something suicidally aggressive, like trying to leap up onto the high bench and attack them. He wasn't sure whether her obvious

boredom would make this more or less likely. He was sure that now she was seated he wanted her to stay seated.

‘Aren’t we supposed to wait?’ ‘Nobody move!’ Eventually his own impatience got the better of him and he exclaimed loudly, ‘I said I have ignored it!’

‘If you do not wish the replay to be replayed for recorded assessment do not make the reference,’ the High Referee instructed mildly. ‘You cannot talk about something you are claiming to ignore.’

What do they do if there’s no replay, the Doctor wondered. How do they judge what’s real? He considered referring back to the moments in the arena before the cameras were deployed, just to see how they would react but decided that this was probably not the best time to indulge his curiosity. ‘Let us go instead,’ he said sonorously, hoping he sounded suitably portentous and legalistically heavyweight, ‘to the moment when the referee intervened and terminated the duel.’ He turned to watch the wall. To his surprise nothing happened. Perhaps he hadn’t been specific enough, he thought. ‘I am referring to that moment when the High Referee and Senior Umpire of the Court of Attack, acting as de facto referee for the duel arising from the spot challenge made by Jarvis and accepted by my client, summarily executed Jarvis by shooting him in the head with his own pistol.’ There was still no response from the wall. ‘I think I am right in saying Jarvis asked for his gun back and said something along the lines of: ‘There’s no reason to waste the Court’s time on a chancer; let’s see her outrun a bullet.’ The wall remained simply a plain and stubbornly blank wall with a normal access door in it. The Doctor turned back to look at the members of the court. ‘Is it broken?’ he asked. ‘Or merely selective?’

‘Is it possible you are not aware or have perhaps forgotten that the High Referee and Senior Umpire never appears in replay?’ the High Referee and Senior Umpire asked.

‘So it’s selective then,’ the Doctor said. ‘And the killing that is central to my case must remain unseen? Is this justice?’

Are we to be held responsible for a death in which we had no direct part?’

It was some time before Snatch Squad Four found pieces of the man who had been killed by the gun-ship. Sita had been more concerned to make sure that her men did not shoot each other than to supervise a thorough search of the area.

When enough of the corpse had been collected to identify one of Security’s finest, she began to realise that what had been happening was different from any of the possible scenarios yet considered.

For the Shift Controller the discovery that they were a man short in the three squads now back at base and on stand-by confirmed his worst suspicion. Somebody had scuffled up a simple head count and left a man on the ground. If this was going to cost somebody their job then by the scuffling gods it was not going to be him.

He was wrong on both counts.

Without the replay, which he had quickly come to realise was what the Court of Attack took to be the only incontrovertible evidence, the Doctor found himself at something of a loss. Their whole case depended on what the High Referee had done, but if he wasn’t allowed to establish what he had done where did that leave them? Maybe it wasn’t too late to ask for someone who knew what they were doing to represent them. Jerro Fanson, say.

While he was still making up his mind what to do, Leela got to her feet and strode forward to stare up at the High Referee. ‘Why are you treated differently from everyone else?’ she demanded. ‘Are you a shaman of the tribe?’

‘The High Referee and Senior Umpire represents the Law of Attack,’ the High Referee said solemnly. ‘He is the Law of Attack personified. The Law of Attack may not be questioned or doubted or it is not the Law of Attack. You should have been taught this.’ He looked towards the Doctor. ‘Your client should know this.’

‘Leela is a warrior, not a lawyer,’ the Doctor said. ‘May I ask for guidance on the question of admissible evidence?’

‘You may not.’

Leela had not taken her eyes from the face of the High Referee. ‘I do not understand why the wall does not show you as it shows us,’ she said. ‘I knew a shaman who feared such devices threatened his powers. Is that the reason?’

The High Referee’s hands were drifting towards the guns again. ‘The Law of Attack requires respect,’ he said. ‘The Law of Attack does not require replay confirmation.’

‘In that case,’ the Doctor said quickly, ‘or in fact in this case, I shall not be presenting replay confirmation of the actions of the High Referee and Senior Umpire since it is not, of course, available and he has further ruled that it is not required for our purposes. I shall merely be stating what happened for the record.’

Leela turned on her heel and went back to her chair. She sat down and stifled a yawn. There was a long pause. It seemed likely to the Doctor that the High Referee was having trouble deciding whether to shoot them before or after having their hands and feet chopped off. As the silence stretched on he was sure he could feel the wrist and ankle bands tightening.

‘Very well,’ the High Referee and Senior Umpire said. ‘You may state what happened for the record.’

‘For the record,’ the Doctor said, ‘there was a cunning plan.’

Sita Benovides knew that someone had used the snatch squads to cross the security perimeter into Aerospace Main. She didn’t know who or why but she intended to find out. Strictly speaking, no part of the screw-up was down to her, but she wouldn’t come out of it well. It would do nothing for her rep and it might just damage her career. But more important than that she felt like a fool and above all things she hated to feel like a fool. Whoever pulled this stunt was in all kinds of trouble.

When the jet-copters landed back at base and the squads had been unloaded Keefer had shed the uniform in one of the shower rooms and quickly got cleaned up. After that he had slipped out and taken the express beltway to the Lunar Flight Concourse, the busiest of the terminals in Aerospace Main.

Within the spaceport there was no sign that there had been any sort of security panic out at the perimeter. He knew it was public policy not to alarm people but Keefer was surprised and relieved that the place was a milling throng of normal travellers, the usual number of whom were routinely lost, confused, irritated, late. In the bustling confusion he should have no difficulty moving between the automatic bank tellers to use the cash plates and thumb prints he had taken from the ambushers he had killed.

At the first machine he took the transaction limit from one plate and transferred it to a second then using the second plate, but a different teller and a different brand of bank cash, he bought a standard round-trip ticket to the Lunar Gaming Resort in the name of a third. At another teller in another trademark currency, he cancelled the Lunar ticket and used the refund and that plate limit to buy a Class C round trip to the Barionian Pioneer Experience in the name of a fourth. And so on. By the time he was finished he had a very expensive open ticket carrying Class A personal security and full seat priority, in the name of Norbert Lung, the man whose plate and limited means he started with. He knew this financial juggling would barely delay pursuit, and that there was just a chance his adversary already knew what he had done, but he still felt a small sharp elation as if he were counterattacking.

He decided to keep Lung's ID pack, though as support for the alias it would not bear scrutiny. The rest of the plates he dropped into the medical incinerator in the private-subscription lavatories. Then he bought an off-planet travel kit from an equipment dispenser and made his way towards the OT embarkation booth.

He intended to take the first flight out to the Orbital Transfer Station and pick up an onward connection to

anywhere: a Big Wheel colony, Barion, one of the outer planet hellholes, wherever the first ship was leaving for. But that was later, his immediate problem was to get past the booking hostess without having Lung's ID scrutinised. He waited for a flight to be called, hung back until the last moment and then strode up to the plate reader and punched in his ticket.

'Do you have ID, Mr Lung?' The girl smiled at him brightly from behind the glass.

Keefer looked around furtively. 'Would you keep your voice down, please.'

'I'm sorry?'

'I'm Norbert Lung,' he murmured with all the bland confidence he had once seen Jerro use to con his way into a network executive's office.

'Yes?' The hostess looked slightly puzzled.

'Norbert Lung!' he whispered fiercely.

Now she was unsettled, 'I'm sorry, sir?' and beginning to get uncomfortable.

'So you should be. Do you normally announce your Class A passengers like that?'

'I'm sorry sir I didn't mean to -'

Keefer interrupted her in the same angry mutter: 'I told my agent this was a stupid idea. Incognito? How would that work? Do you have any idea what will happen if they realise I'm here? Do you want a riot on your hands?'

'I should say not, sir, no.'

'Then stop wasting valuable time and get me on the flight.' Would she have the nerve to admit that she had no idea who he was? Would she insist on seeing Norbert Lung's ID?

'Well?'

'The flight is full.'

No she wouldn't. 'So?'

'I shall have to stand down a C. If you make your way to the boarding lift, sir, I'll take care of it.'

He would have to thank Jerro for that one too...

If they ever saw him again, the Doctor thought, they would have to thank Jerro Fanson for this.

‘In summary then,’ the High Referee continued, ‘you have argued that the de facto referee denied you the opportunity to exploit your client’s full potential thereby intervening in and breaching an already existing agent-fighter privilege. You further claim denial of your first subsection rights under Kill Rule Two and have argued that this was not an unconsummated kill but an involuntarily interrupted contest under Kill Rule Three Subsection Seven. We will vote on these submissions.’

The Doctor got to his feet again. ‘There is one further argument I wish to make,’ he said.

‘We will vote on these submissions,’ the High Referee repeated in exactly the same tone of voice, and small screens and touch panels folded out of the seats and swung round in front of the members of the court.

The Doctor sat down again. In the chair beside him Leela yawned copiously. ‘This is boring,’ she said to him, not bothering to keep her voice down. ‘Boring and stupid. I do not care what these people decide.’

‘I think you’ve made that clear,’ the Doctor said quietly.

‘Why are we listening to them?’ Leela persisted. ‘Why are we waiting to hear what they will say? It is a waste of time.’

‘It’s difficult to know what will be a waste of time until after the time has been wasted, by which time it is too late,’ the Doctor said. ‘So predicting what will be a waste of time is something of a waste of time. Unless it gives you pleasure of course when it probably doesn’t count as a waste of time.’

Leela yawned again. ‘I am sorry I did not hear what you said, Doctor.’

The Doctor smiled. ‘That was a waste of time then,’ he said.

Above them the screens and panels in front of the members of the court folded away and the High Referee announced, ‘The vote is nine. Your submissions are accepted. You are free to go.’

The Doctor got to his feet. ‘Just like that?’ he said. ‘I have another submission to offer. Another argument. I have an important point I wish to make.’

‘Irrelevant,’ the High Referee observed. ‘Further arguments and submissions can have no bearing on this case.’

The Doctor felt his wrist and ankle bands loosen and as he watched they unclasped and curled back on themselves forming small rolls, which then dropped off. He left them where they lay. Leela meanwhile was stamping on hers and kicking them away so that they skittered across the floor and hit the base of the tiered seats on which the High Referee and Senior Umpire of Duel and the Panel of Fight Replay still sat in solemn session.

‘My argument,’ the Doctor said, ‘is that the ruling of this court has made it legally possible to win a duel without the necessity of killing.’ The High Referee ignored him and stood up. The Doctor was struck by what a small and undistinguished looking man he was. The other eight members of the court waited for a moment and they too then stood up.

‘The session of this Court of Attack is at an end,’ the High Referee announced. ‘By the Rules of Attack we live and we die. Let the Rules of Attack be maintained before all and every one.’

As the members of the court filed out of a doorway at the end of the elevated tier of seats, the Doctor said, more or less to himself, ‘Well that was bizarre.’

‘What was it for?’ Leela asked.

‘It was to make murder seem like an acceptable way of life,’ the Doctor said. ‘We are apparently free to go and I think we should go back to the TARDIS and leave immediately. This is a sick society and we don’t want to catch whatever it’s got.’ He started towards the door.

Leela did not follow him. ‘What about the man, Jerro Fanson?’ she demanded of his departing back.

‘What about him?’ the Doctor said, striding out of the doorway and disappearing into the corridor.

‘You gave him your promise,’ Leela shouted.

The Doctor stuck his head back round the door. ‘Irrelevant,’ he said. ‘He was obviously released before we were.’

‘Why is it obvious?’

The Doctor sighed. She was right of course, he thought. Irritating girl. Before they left he should check and make sure. ‘We’ll check and make sure,’ he said. ‘Before we leave.’

Leela nodded. ‘If your word has no value your life has no meaning,’ she said solemnly.

The Doctor smiled his wolfish smile. ‘Another quote from the Warrior’s Handbook?’ he teased.

Leela walked towards the door. ‘A warrior’s trust must be given before it can be taken,’ she said.

‘Oh dear I’m sorry I asked,’ he said wryly as they set off down the anonymous white corridor looking for directions and information and, most important of all as far the Doctor was concerned, the way out.

Chapter Seven

A spaceplane's climb to orbit was reputed to be one of *the* great travel experiences, especially if you could afford a window seat. From his window seat, Keefer watched the sky turn from blue to black, and then craned for a glimpse back at the planet's surface. Like everyone else he had seen tri-dee footage of this, and he had ridden a simulator, but it turned out that the real thing was different. It was noisier, less comfortable and you couldn't see as much: and yet it was more satisfying. Maybe it was because you knew it was real, and although you could trick your senses, Keefer understood better than most there was one instinctive response you couldn't fool. Only real things could really kill you. Deep down the thrill of reality was the chance of dying.

Before this his experience of off-planet travel was limited to one brief trip to the first moon when he was a kid. It had been paid for by the company orphanage so that he could take the entry tests for the Space Force training college, the Luni-Uni. He passed them all, but then the psych-profiling cost him the place and a better life. There had been a lot of technical jargon but the gist of it was that he was too aggressive. He never got into fights with the other kids, was never insolent to the trainers, never defied the dormitory matrons, but still the machines detected a buried rage, which it was suggested might surface at any time.

It occurred to Keefer that, but for that evaluation, he might have been flying the spaceplane now instead of hiding in it, running from one of the two most powerful people in the system. And since he didn't know which of the two most powerful people in the system it was, he might not be running from them at all, he could be running right to them. Then it struck him: a blinding flash of the obvious. Running right to them was his only chance of survival.

‘That’s why they did it that way,’ Sita explained patiently. ‘Precisely because we would think it was too much trouble.’

The State Security Minister looked sceptical. ‘You could buy your way into the spaceport for less than the cost of the ammunition. And nobody the wiser.’

Sita put down untasted the crystal glass of very dry tree-berry wine he had given her. ‘With respect Minister, my investigations have not confirmed corruption at Aerospace Main as yet.’

‘And if you go chasing after speculative terrorists you are unlikely to do so, Major Benovides.’ The minister sipped his own wine appreciatively.

For the first time Sita wondered if the attack was an exercise after all and reporting her conclusions to this idiot had been a mistake. ‘It’s the only reasonable interpretation of what happened,’ she said.

The minister looked amused. ‘Reasonable you say?’

‘What’s your explanation then?’

His amused expression changed to one of irritation and he said coldly: ‘I do not have one. At least as far as a major is concerned I do not have one. Now I want to hear no more of this. You will continue with your assigned task, unless of course you would prefer a moon posting?’

The threat was slight but it was there, so Sita smiled and said: ‘Not really.’ She picked up her glass and drank. It was a passable sec. As he always did, he was watching for her reaction. ‘Mm... Superb as ever,’ she offered, and the minister, a dangerously powerful man, smiled fatuously at this compliment to his taste and expertise.

‘Tell me,’ he said after a moment, ‘how is your father these days? I believe I owe him a lunch, do I not?’

Now that he and Leela were no longer prisoners the Doctor found the Court of Attack lock-up was suddenly swarming with helpful staff. It appeared that it was, as he had suspected, deliberate policy to isolate the lock-up prisoners from any outside human contact. Although direct access to the in-house computer terminals was not available to him

any more, the warders, or lockup administrators as they preferred to be called, were more than ready to process requests for information and search the computer database on behalf of any visiting non-prisoner.

'You don't have a visitor pass, sir,' the skinny young man remarked as he returned from the central control and monitoring complex to the waiting area with the print-out for the Doctor. 'Neither does your... pretty friend.' He smiled a small hopeful smile at Leela. She did not smile back and he looked away shyly. He did not seem put out, indeed her reaction seemed to be no more than he expected. 'It's not important, sir,' he said. 'It's just that regulations... you know how it is.'

The Doctor took the print-out. 'I do indeed,' he said. 'But we're not actually visiting. In fact we're leaving. Almost immediately.'

'I know,' the young man said, and he looked again at Leela. 'You must have fought often to be as good as you are?'

'Why do you ask?' she said, peering through the glass panels of the airtight security doors that blocked access to the inner complex.

'I wanted to see your record of duels but I couldn't, it wasn't there. At least it wasn't available.'

'Why does this matter to you?'

The young man shook his head and shrugged uncertainly. 'I just wanted to know more about you that's all. I'm a fan. I'm really looking forward to your next fight. I'm a recruit. I shall be right there with you.'

'The voices,' Leela said. 'The whisperers who give orders. Are they in here?'

'The proximity speakers are operated from the communication centre, yes,' the young man said, clearly eager to show off to her, 'and the communication centre is a sub-department of the administration complex where I work.'

'It is not communication if it cannot be answered,' Leela said, dismissively.

The young man was enraptured. 'There you are, you see. That's what I mean. You're so much more aware than most fighters. So much more thoughtful. I'm definitely a recruit.'

'What does it mean, you are a recruit?'

'When you fight in the arena I'll go for all your angles, closest package I can afford. In fact I'm ready to sign up for an option now before your price gets way beyond me.'

Leela turned away from the doors. 'What are you talking about?' she demanded. 'Doctor what is he talking about?'

But the Doctor had been too busy reading the details of the interrogation and the verdict in the case of Attack versus Jerro Fanson to pay any attention to the exchange between Leela and her young admirer. He couldn't believe what he had read. Surely it couldn't be correct. Fanson had seemed so certain that whatever else was going on he was basically in no real danger and would be released sooner or later. 'He was found guilty?' he said. He brandished the paper at the young man. 'This is Jerro Fanson's court transcript isn't it?'

'Yes sir, it is.'

'He was an innocent man,' the Doctor said. 'I've seldom seen a man more convinced or convincing. I was sure he hadn't done it. He said it was a mistake and I believed him. Leela didn't believe him but then she didn't like him.'

'The computer doesn't make mistakes, sir.'

'To err is human,' the Doctor said, pocketing the print-out. 'But to really foul up you need a computer.'

'I'm sorry?' The young man looked puzzled.

'Does everyone round here trust the computer so implicitly?'

'Of course.'

'Of course.' The Doctor nodded. 'That's why Jerro Fanson chose trial by computer. He thought he could trust it.'

'He was gambling,' the young man said. 'It was a desperate gamble but I'm guessing the other two options would have been even more difficult for him.'

'The other two options?' Leela asked. She glanced at the Doctor. 'He lied about that as well. He said there was only one.'

The Doctor noticed that several other lock-up administrators had wandered out from the inner complex and were hanging about in the background. They were making no secret of their interest and curiosity, most of which was focused on Leela.

‘There’s open court pleading, obviously, which is what you did,’ the young man said.

‘We did not plead,’ Leela muttered.

‘Agents aren’t trusted to defend themselves,’ the young man went on, ‘only clients. And he was making wild accusations about people plotting against him and mad stuff like that. And his main fighter has gone missing in suspicious circumstances. Didn’t want to fight for him by the look of it.’

‘That would be Keefer?’ the Doctor suggested.

‘You know about him?’

‘No, never heard of him,’ the Doctor said. ‘What was the other option again?’

The young man smiled uncertainly. ‘Well you know...’

‘Yes, of course, but remind me.’

‘Trial by combat obviously.’

The Doctor threw his hands up. ‘Trial by combat, obviously. And he would have fought who... whom?’

The young man grinned. ‘You’re right it would have been him wouldn’t it, since his fighter’s a no-show. Can you see Fanson facing say Starvil, or Maidenly or Cordell, I mean if the Umpire was in a bad mood he could have named any of them, cost no object. Well he couldn’t have sponsored Starvil because he was killed just recently.’

‘Is that why this Keefer disappeared do you think?’ the Doctor asked.

‘You couldn’t blame him,’ the young man said.

‘What will happen to Fanson?’ Leela asked.

Again the young man smiled uncertainly, he was clearly in awe of Leela and was not sure whether she was serious, or whether perhaps she was teasing him. ‘He’s been skullcapped.’ He shrugged and grimaced. ‘He’d be better dead if you ask me.’

Leela said flatly, 'Death is a choice you can make only for yourself, you cannot make it for someone else.'

He snorted. 'Well he's not in any position to make it for himself, not any more, and if it was me I'd prefer to die.' He smiled apologetically. 'It's probably different for you. I mean you probably feel differently. Doing what you do.'

The Doctor wanted more information about what exactly skullcapping was, but he couldn't think of a way to ask the young man without appearing madder, sadder and more dangerous to know than he already did. While his feeling was that Leela could get away with any sort of outrageous behaviour and gnomic utterances, he himself needed to be a lot more circumspect if they were going to get away from here without further problems. 'Can we see Fanson?' he asked finally.

This time there was no uncertainty in the young man's response. 'What for? You think there might be something left?' He shook his head sympathetically. 'Don't bother, there isn't. He dribbles, he doesn't know who he is...'

In the background the little crowd of curious onlookers had been growing steadily and the waiting area was beginning to get slightly congested. Where had all these people come from, the Doctor wondered? One or two of them actually seemed to be interested in him, judging from the way they smiled and waved if he caught their eye. 'Leela,' he said, quietly drawing her attention to them, 'I think Fanson may have been onto something.'

'What do they want?' she asked as she ran her eye over the group and most of them waved and smiled.

'Try waving back,' the Doctor suggested.

'What for?' Leela was puzzled and more than a little suspicious.

'Just a small wave,' the Doctor said. 'Think of it as testing a theory.'

Leela raised her hand a little and gave a very slight and grudging gesture, not much more than a twitch. Everyone beamed delightedly and some ragged applause broke out.

'Yes,' the Doctor said. 'I do believe we're famous.'

Behind them the security doors souged open and a tall woman strode out. 'All right, people,' she said loudly. 'What's going on here? Everybody back to work. Last time I checked this was not a public holiday. It's not even a scheduled meal break. Come on, come on, we've got a lock-up to run so let's get on with it shall we.' The crowd broke up and people quickly disappeared into the corridors and back through the security doors. 'You too Bazzy,' the woman said to the skinny young man. 'How long does it take to deliver a download sheet?'

'There were supplementary questions, ma'am,' he said defensively.

'That was my fault I'm afraid,' the Doctor said. 'I was taking advantage of Bazzy's good manners to delay him and get his opinion on one or two matters of concern to me...' he waved vaguely in Leela's direction, '...us.'

'And I'm sure he was very flattered, Doctor,' the woman said, 'but he has work to do.' She dismissed the young man with a nod towards the security doors.

The Doctor smiled benignly. 'Thank you for your help, Bazzy.'

'It was an honour to meet you, sir,' the skinny young man said, leaving reluctantly but not so slowly as to be insubordinate. As he passed Leela he said, 'I can't tell you what a thrill it was...'

Leela favoured him with a puzzled frown. 'What was?' she asked.

He smiled with pure delight. 'Thank you,' he said and disappeared through the automatic doors.

'I have to be honest,' the woman remarked, 'I've never understood the appeal of duelling. Not as a spectacle. Why would you want to *watch* the killing?'

'I wouldn't,' the Doctor said. 'I've never been a big fan of death myself.'

'You and Leela are probably in the wrong business then.'

The Doctor smiled his most charming smile. 'The wrong place certainly,' he said, and wondered what she would think

if she knew he was referring to this whole bit of this whole universe.

‘Speaking of which; the woman said, ‘there’s press out front. A lot of press. It’s somewhere between a melee and a riot out there. Did you want me to arrange for a runner at the side door?’

When in doubt, the Doctor thought, repeat the question in a vague sort of way, and said, ‘A runner?’

‘I can arrange for a good reliable driver,’ she glanced at Leela, careful to include her in any decision, ‘who’ll get you there in one piece.’

Obviously a vehicle, the Doctor thought, presumably like the one they were brought here in, only this time with added choice perhaps. ‘If you think it would be advisable. We’ll be guided by you,’ he said and saw she was immediately pleased and a little flattered. She might not be a fan of duelling but she wasn’t unaffected by the fame of the duellists.

‘I’ll set it up,’ she said, bustling away. ‘I won’t be long.’

‘Get us where in one piece?’ Leela asked.

‘Have you some further objection to going back to the TARDIS?’ the Doctor asked, knowing quite well that she would have.

Leela nodded thoughtfully. ‘How do we find out where this Keefer might be hiding?’

The giant Hakai Corporation lost money on the Orbital Transfer Station but they continued to run it for its public relations value. An organisation that made most of its profits from the ruthless exploitation of outer-world mining installations had found that a benign public service image closer to home was useful. The image and its benefits were precisely costed however. The result was a no-frills operation with minimum manning and nothing in the way of ID-linked surveillance. To promise elaborate control and rigorous enforcement with no intention of paying for either would be counterproductive. So for a fugitive, or for anyone trying to escape attention for whatever reason, the satellite was an ideal jumping-off point. It was known that if you could make

it to the Hakai OTS you were more or less home free. Of course, home free was a long way from safe.

When he disembarked, Keefer found weightlessness was no more of a problem than it had been when he took the tests as a youngster. Other passengers, motion-sick and uncoordinated, were clinging to the soft plastic clutch rails and waiting miserably for attendants to show up. Keefer ignored them as he floated through the padded luminous tube that linked the spaceplane and the station. Once past he was aware suddenly of how vulnerable he would have been if any of them had been faking. Moaning and vomiting into a sick-set might not be original distraction strategies, but fighters had glanced away for less and lost.

‘Hakai Space Services welcomes you to Hakai Transfer, the largest and busiest inter-world transfer facility anywhere,’ chirruped the disembarkation register as it verified that his ID and ticket matched. It was a formality that the machine would have bypassed with no more than a minor deviation into the briefest of subroutines, but if it could be avoided Keefer preferred not to leave even that much of a trace. The register routinely debited his journey and went on: ‘For your convenience Mr Lung: times, destinations and the current booking status of all onward flights are displayed in the inner core, which is spun to one-ninth-G for your particular comfort. Travelators for the core are situated in the gold channel.’

Keefer took the documents from the slot and shoved himself off in the direction indicated by the yellow arrows that glowed below the smooth surface plastic of the outer embarkation concourse.

Unlike the three much larger Big Wheel colonies, which turned on their central axes so that the outer rims provided artificial gravity for the settler populations, the Hakai station was deliberately not spun. More ships could dock more easily that way and, since passengers were only in transit, gravity was not a priority. Fully integrated pseudo-grav drive generators were prohibitively expensive and horrendously difficult to maintain. They were not even considered. There

was a stabilising gyroscope in the central core, though, and Hakai's PR division had devised the usual added-value fraud by fitting out a small Class A waiting area there and claiming that was its function.

Powered hand-stirrups were available to tow privileged passengers to their exclusive gravity but Keefer had already decided not to use them. They looked as though they would limit his ability to react. Now he decided not to use the Class A waiting area either. He had been unsettled by his carelessness on disembarkation: he didn't believe that crap about being home free so why was he behaving as though he did? He thought he had the beginnings of a plan, but for the moment what he needed was to change direction. He grabbed at a rail and pulled himself on towards the wider and busier general access sector.

The GA reminded him of the Lunar Flight Concourse at 'Space Main, only smaller and with extra chaos in the vertical as transfer passengers struggled to cope with weightlessness. He drifted through the throng to one of the automatic bank tellers ranged around the gently curving wall at various heights from the arbitrarily designated floor. Without using the ID he called up the immediate outward schedule.

There were two people he was sure could have sent that android against him. Try as he might Keefer could think of nothing to connect him to either of them. This left him no choice but to pick one at random and go after them. That way right or wrong he'd have the answer he needed. Both were almost mythical figures with power beyond wealth, and wealth beyond imagining. But nobody was completely beyond the attentions and speculations of the press, not even *they* were rich and powerful enough for that, so some details of their lives were public knowledge. Where they operated from and spent most time for example, what for less exotic figures might be called 'home', was no secret back on the planet. Indeed why should it be as neither of them lived there?

Which of the two Keefer chose to go up against would depend, he decided simply, on which ships were leaving for where in the next few hours. He didn't realise as he scrolled

slowly through the lists that this made it somewhat less than a random choice. When he found what he was looking for he booked a one-way flight claiming seat priority and Class A personal security, but cancelling the rest of the open ticket in favour of a full cash refund in the strongest trademark currency notes.

The machine questioned the transaction politely but loudly: 'All leading reassurance and crime-prevention companies advise against carrying cash.' There was an element of blackmail in the volume of this announcement. By drawing the attention of everyone within earshot it was assumed that customers would feel vulnerable enough to change their minds. 'We would be failing in our duty not to warn you of the danger you will be in with that number of currency notes on your person.'

A fluorescent flashing *Rob Me* would be subtler, Keefer thought.

'Would you care to revise your instructions?' the teller finished in a more reasonable tone.

'No.'

While the machine printed and registered the currency with the Central Bank of Sumana it tried one last time. 'Are you sure you understand the risks?'

'Yes.'

'I doubt that,' a voice behind Keefer said softly, and he felt something pressed lightly into the small of his back. He made no attempt to turn round. 'Don't even think about turning round,' the voice went on, 'what you don't see may not kill you. Yet.'

'Here is your currency,' the machine said, pushing the wad of brightly coloured notes forward between its dispensing rollers. 'Please check the transaction and confirm that it is correct.'

Keefer needed to know what his adversary was using. 'What do you want me to do?' he asked.

'Please check the transaction and confirm that it is correct,' the automatic teller repeated automatically.

‘Well?’ Keefer was coldly focused now, waiting for the combat options to open out.

‘Take the money and say it’s right, you stupid scuffwit,’ the voice had a smirk in it, ‘unless you want to be a freelance kidney donor.’

Too confident to be bluffing, and the wordplay was knife not gun. Slowly Keefer reached for the money. A knife in zero-G? Had to be laser-enhanced. Lethal range on a decent blade: fifty centimetres set for slash; for stab, maybe half that. It would be cued for stab and the less conspicuous kill. He took the money and riffled through the notes. ‘The transaction is correct,’ he said.

‘Thank you for using Instacash, the currency that counts,’ the machine crooned as it closed down.

‘Okay lets go.’ Another light touch on his back. ‘Put the cash in your pocket and head for the cheap washrooms.’

Keefer pushed himself off. He didn’t bother to pretend that he was having difficulty with weightlessness, although that might have given him an edge. Somehow he wanted this man to understand what he was taking on, as much as he could ever understand, because if it came to a fight killing him would be unavoidable. He wondered briefly whether that had been in his mind all along, right from the moment he decided to draw such a lot of cash in the crowded GA sector.

Chapter Eight

From behind the darkened windows of one of the lock-up's official runners the Doctor and Leela could see the assembled news crews waiting in front of the main building. There was none of the pushing and shoving and general mayhem the Doctor had been expecting. 'They seem remarkably restrained,' he remarked. 'Not exactly the press pack feeding frenzy we'd been led to expect.'

The driver was a gaunt man in late middle age. He glanced in the mirror and grinned at the Doctor. 'You don't push your luck while the little boss is in the building,' he said. 'Not if you know what's good for you.'

'Not even the press?' the Doctor said.

'Not even the press,' the driver chortled. 'It came as a nasty shock to them when they found out he was lurking about in the background with the surveillance tri-dees on manual override.'

'Why would he do that?' Leela asked in a tone that suggested she understood what he had just said.

'Word was he's not keen on you two getting any more free publicity, not from his court, not if he can help it.' He guided the runner onto the motorway feeder ramp and stopped it while he set the default preferences on the control board. When he was satisfied that everything was functioning properly he released the brakes and relaxed, turning round in the seat and giving his full attention to his passengers. 'I watched the case like everyone else,' he said, as the runner jerked into motion and took itself into the traffic stream heading down onto the motorway. 'I listened to the expert commentaries and the studio discussions. And the thing of it is I still don't know whether you planned the whole thing right from the beginning or not.'

'We did not,' Leela said flatly.

‘Not that it really matters,’ the Doctor remarked.

‘It really matters to the little boss,’ the driver said. He put a skinny elbow on the back of the seat and rested his chin on his forearm. ‘Word is he thinks you did, he thinks you used him and his court and he is not a happy man.’

‘I’m amazed he let us go under the circumstances,’ the Doctor said. ‘Last time I saw him unhappy he shot someone.’

‘He has let us go?’ Leela asked suspiciously, her hand on the hilt of her knife.

If the driver noticed the threat he gave no indication of it. With the slightest of shrugs he said, ‘The law of attack’s the law of attack. He represents the law of attack. He wouldn’t do anything that wasn’t within the law. Nobody kills without the little boss’s sign-off on the rules, that’s a scuffling big job when you come to think about it. Must weigh heavy on a man.’

‘Especially a small man,’ the Doctor said and found himself wondering what other laws there might be - and if in fact there were any. Surely there had to be other rules apart from those relating to killing. No society, not even a sick one like this, could function without some routine laws. If they were going to make a token effort to find this man Keefer it would probably be a good idea to get a notion of how everything else worked. ‘It’s not as if he’s responsible for all the laws though,’ he said casually, as though he was thinking aloud as much as making desultory small talk.

‘Well no,’ the driver agreed. ‘But the non-combat stuff is...’ again he shrugged, ‘sort of routine and a bit dull, right?’

‘Right,’ the Doctor said, nodding. ‘Important though. Can’t have people stealing and swindling and breaking traffic laws.’

The runner had settled into a central lane of the motorway and was travelling at a steady unthreatening speed. Around it in the other lanes other traffic was moving at other speeds. Vehicles switched places, weaved in and out of lines of traffic, speeded up, slowed down; and every shift and movement was smoothly controlled and subtly choreographed by a powerful and totally reliable computer.

‘That’s what they tell us the cops are for,’ the driver snorted. ‘Not convinced myself. Scum-sucking scufflers to a man in my experience. Even the women. What do you reckon, Doctor?’

‘I haven’t had a lot of experience of them,’ the Doctor said.

‘I should try to keep it that way if I were you,’ the driver said gravely.

‘I’ll do my best,’ the Doctor said and, thinking this conversation was a waste of time after all, looked out of the side window at the convoys of the heavy, driverless freight carriers they were routinely overtaking.

But the driver was not to be discouraged. ‘So what does it all mean then? I mean what does it mean for the noble contest?’

‘What does what mean for what noble contest?’ the Doctor asked without thinking.

‘There you go, you see. You’re not old school are you? You’re no respecter of tradition are you?’

‘I suppose not,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘I’ve always been a bit of an iconoclast.’

‘What you did back in the Court of Attack, what does it do to the way things are supposed to be, do you know? Do you care?’ He looked at Leela and smiled unconvincingly. ‘You broke a basic rule and you got away with it didn’t you? You broke a fundamental rule. That’s what it comes down to.’

‘No,’ Leela said. ‘I know the rules by which a warrior lives. I broke no rule.’

The Doctor was suddenly aware that for no immediately apparent reason the conversation had taken a minor turn for the tense. ‘The little boss didn’t think that’s what it came down to,’ he said reasonably. ‘He found in our favour remember.’

‘The little boss is old school,’ the driver said. ‘He hasn’t liked the way things have been going for a long time now but he doesn’t know what to do about it. I know for a fact he’s been spitting blood over the Maidenly-Baloch match.’

The Doctor saw an opportunity to avoid the developing confrontation. 'He doesn't like the Maidenly-Baloch match?' he prompted.

'He'd ban it if he could.'

But as ever Leela was not interested in being diplomatic. Her general hostility and suspicion had subsided very little despite their release from the lock-up. She fixed the driver with a narrow-eyed stare. 'Where are you taking us?'

The driver looked slightly uncomfortable. 'I've set it for Central and then I thought you could direct me, Doctor.'

Leela pointedly looked out of each side window and then glanced back to the rear. Finally she leaned forward to peer in the direction they were going.

The Doctor smiled at the driver. 'So what's the problem with the Maidenly-Baloch fight?' he said. 'Not old school enough I suppose?'

'Is this the way to Central?' Leela asked. 'I do not think it is.'

'What makes you say that?' the driver asked indignantly.

The Doctor shot Leela an angry glare. 'Yes, what makes you say that,' he said.

'This does not look like the way to Central,' she said confidently.

The driver's indignation had given way to anger. 'Are you questioning my professionalism?' he demanded.

'Are you questioning his professionalism?' the Doctor asked.

'I am questioning what he is doing,' Leela said and began to draw her knife.

'Pull that thing and I'll blow your scuffling head off,' the driver said calmly from behind the handgun that he was resting on the back of the seat.

'Leela,' the Doctor warned, putting a restraining hand on her wrist to stop her from drawing the knife anyway. He felt her momentary coiled impulse to attack before she relaxed and sat back.

'That's right,' the driver said. 'You listen to your agent and just sit back and enjoy the ride.'

‘You’ve made your point,’ the Doctor said. ‘We’ll do as you say. In the meantime perhaps you’d like to point that thing somewhere else.’

The gun never wavered. ‘Now *you’re* questioning my professionalism,’ the driver said. ‘Both of you put your hands on the arms of the seat, palms down.’

The Orbital Transfer Station’s cheap washrooms were deserted. The law required low-cost facilities to be provided in all public gathering places, but very few people used them. The feeling was that if you couldn’t afford to pay a private rate to eliminate your bodily wastes the chances were you had unsanitary habits or an uninsured disease. Circumstances alter cases but they seldom affect prejudices and although travel off planet was denied by law to such low-level deviants the subsidised lavatories were avoided here just the same.

‘You don’t have to do this,’ Keefer said as he floated into the compartment. The stiff-curtained cubicles with their bog-standard electrical suction units were all silent and empty. He halted his drift at the nearest one. ‘Are you going to kill me?’ he asked. If he knew precisely where the man was then not knowing which hand the knife was in wouldn’t matter. Most of the knifers he had come up against were ambidextrous and fought flicking the weapon from hand to hand, probing for weaknesses. But was this a fighter, and how would weightlessness affect the technique?

‘The money,’ the voice said.

Keefer made a show of reaching for it. His opponent’s position still wasn’t exact enough so he closed his eyes and said, ‘I said are you going to try and kill me?’

There was a fractional pause. ‘Try and kill you? No problem. Money. *Money!*’ The last word was louder, fiercer, and Keefer knew the man would be thrusting his head forward to speak it.

The human ear picks sound direction poorly but with the source close and with breath-smell to supplement the sound data, Keefer could place him now exactly. He opened his

eyes. Got you, his mind exulted. He flipped the wad of notes over his right shoulder, and when they passed out of his peripheral vision he grabbed a safety handle and pivoted, twisting himself to the left.

The man was short and thickset with a Western-zone cast to his features. He held the laser blade in his left hand and with his right was hesitating about reaching for the spinning cash. He had been ready for any move but his attention was divided and it marginally slowed his lunge. That was all Keefer needed. He parried the stiletto, pushing it outwards so that it missed his chest and seared a neat hole in the plastic wall.

As the man tried to draw back for a second stab, Keefer used the momentum and the superior purchase from his hold on the safety handle to turn the moving blade. He didn't waste effort struggling for possession but simply braced the man's grip on the knife and jerked him forward.

The laser punched through the man's side and severed his lower spine. A helpless spasm clenched through him and he began to twitch uncontrollably. Keefer barely looked at him as he took the knife from the nerveless hand and dispatched him with a single blow up through the jaw and into the brain.

Without really thinking about it Keefer swapped IDs with the dead man, shoved the corpse into one of the cubicles, and carefully sealed the curtain. He retrieved the money and then, when he had satisfied himself that there were no obvious signs of a struggle and that he looked normal, he left the washrooms and headed for the Geewin system embarkation zone.

The stocky young man with the white streaked, shoulder length hair was clearly furious. 'You did what?'

'They wouldn't have come otherwise.' The driver looked to the Doctor for confirmation and, oddly, for support. 'You wouldn't have come otherwise, would you?'

They were standing by the parked runner in an area of small, single-storey houses squeezed onto narrow, individual plots of scrubby land. The buildings were little more than

shacks and here and there along the dusty access road a straggly tree struggled to remain upright and alive.

‘Given the choice,’ the Doctor said rubbing his wrists to emphasise the point, ‘I do normally prefer a less binding invitation.’

‘I cannot believe you pulled a gun,’ the young man raged, ‘and then wrist clamped them, you stupid old scuffwit.’

‘Hey!’ The driver jabbed an angry finger at the young man’s face. ‘You do not talk to me like that. I am your father and I did what I did for you.’ He turned his back on the young man. ‘And anyway the gun wasn’t loaded.’ He went round to the other rear door of the runner, to where Leela was still sitting with her wrists tightly secured to the seat arms. ‘The gun wasn’t loaded you know,’ he said to her. ‘If that helps at all.’

‘It does not help at all,’ Leela said through gritted teeth.

‘I’m sorry if I affronted your dignity,’ the driver said. ‘Not if, I didn’t mean if, I mean obviously I did affront your dignity. I’m sorry I didn’t mean to be -’

‘Release me,’ Leela interrupted. ‘I have no use for your apologies.’

He leaned in through the front door and flicked the release switch. ‘You have the right to try and kill me,’ he said. ‘I accept that:

‘Do not talk like a fool,’ Leela said coldly. ‘I am a warrior. I do not kill stammering old men.’ She stepped out of the runner and stretched, not deigning to rub the circulation back into her wrists as the Doctor had done. ‘A warrior does not kill without reason. I do not kill without reason.’

‘You see?’ the young man said. ‘I told you. I told you it was a whole new way. I told you they were the first of a whole new way.’

‘Good,’ the Doctor said cheerfully. ‘Now that we’ve got that all sorted out perhaps you’d like to explain why you brought us here?’

‘I want you to help my son,’ the driver said.

‘Why?’ the Doctor asked. ‘Is he in trouble?’ He turned to the young man and smiled. ‘Are you in trouble? Because, if you

are, I think I'm probably not the person you should be talking to. I'm not even sure what constitutes trouble around here.'

'I'm a fighter,' the young man said. 'At least I want to be a fighter. I've been training for a long time. I'm fit; I'm fast; I've got the classic moves all nailed down.'

'All except one,' the driver said, allowing an edge of bitterness and contempt to touch his tone. 'The only one that really matters. The only one that really counts.'

'I want to be a duellist. I want to be a pro.'

The driver threw up his hands in mock disbelief. 'But he doesn't want to kill anyone.'

'I think that's admirable,' the Doctor said. 'But what's it got to do with me?'

'I want you to represent him,' the driver said. 'As far as I can see you're his only chance for survival.'

'That's very flattering,' the Doctor said, 'but I'm not sure it's true and anyway I've already got a client.' He looked at Leela, willing her to back him up, but as he had come to expect recently her attention was elsewhere. He turned to look where she was looking.

People had started coming out of the nearby houses and gathering in small groups. Even as he watched the small groups coalesced into larger groups. From neighbouring streets more people came. A crowd was assembling. It struck the Doctor that a growing crowd had something inevitable about it, something not properly free, that as a process it was as mindless as drops of water spreading into a puddle or possibly microbes multiplying under a microscope. 'Doctor?' Leela said, interrupting his inappropriate reverie. 'It is another crowd of people.'

'So it is,' the Doctor agreed.

'No,' Leela said irritably, 'I mean what do they want and what am I supposed to do this time? Should I wave at them?'

'They're just curious,' the Doctor said. 'It seems you're definitely a celebrity.'

The driver said, 'I wouldn't wave at them. People round here are traditional fight fans. They're not going to like you or what you did.'

As the Doctor could have predicted Leela immediately waved at the crowd. There was a long brooding pause and then one or two waved back, and after another general hesitation more began to wave. Leela waved again, more vigorously this time. A ripple of applause ran through the crowd and then they were all applauding and some were cheering. And then they were all cheering.

The Doctor had to raise his voice to make himself heard. 'Imagine what would happen if they actually *liked* you,' he said. 'Or if you blew them a kiss. Try blowing them a kiss.'

Leela ignored the suggestion. 'What happens now?' she asked.

'I can't help thinking,' the Doctor said, 'that finding Keefer would be much more straightforward if we put some more of Jerro Fanson's cunning plan into action.'

Leela looked puzzled. 'Some more of his plan?'

'Famous will only get you so far,' the Doctor said. 'Rich and famous is much more practical.' He smiled his startling smile and turned back towards the crowd and waved at them cheerfully. They cheered and clapped. 'This is rather enjoyable isn't it? I can see where it might get to be addictive.' He leaned towards the driver. 'When's the next formal duel? One that everyone will watch and talk about?'

The driver frowned. 'You don't know?'

The Doctor pretended not to have heard. 'What?'

The driver raised his voice. 'Everyone knows that.'

'Pretend for the sake of argument,' the Doctor bellowed in his ear, 'that I've been in the Court of Attack lock-up. You know: the place where they keep you cut off from any outside contact.'

'Not for that long,' the driver shouted. 'It's still the same as when you went in.'

'The Maidenly-Baloch match,' the Doctor suggested, keeping the guesswork out of his tone.

'Still the biggest thing since spaceplanes,' the driver agreed.

‘Can we get tickets do you think?’ the Doctor asked loudly, smiling to allow the possibility that he was making an outrageous joke.

The fight was a sell-out.

Maidenly had been ducking a confrontation with Baloch for months, so they said. According to the publicity, Swordmaster Maidenly knew that he was no match for the only other sabre specialist in the Prime Division. Baloch was one of the new breed of fighters. Unorthodox and spectacular, he was a flashy psychopath who took risks to inflict agony and humiliation because that was what he enjoyed. Maidenly on the other hand was old school. He killed for money and for pride. There was nothing else in it for him: no pleasure, no sick kick.

This time the money was reputed to be huge. The purse was the biggest ever fought for, and that took no account of the Guild-negotiated share of the gate. For the remote planet-wide and interplanetary audience there were an unprecedented fifteen levels of viewing: the most expensive covering every available angle and every possible close-up, every bead of sweat and every drop of blood, guaranteeing to miss nothing. More unusually, it was possible for thousands of spectators to be physically present at the fight and invitations for the best seats were changing hands for the sort of sums that only expertly hysterical hype can produce.

Everything was right about this one. The venue was a large and famous arena, perhaps the most famous of all the arenas apart from the first, simple and most sacred one. The publicity claimed that not since the days of the first fights had a duel been more significant and a setting been more noble...

And then on the night, with it all in place and an audience in the hundreds of millions waiting, Maidenly was a no-show. He simply disappeared. It was assumed that he had lost his nerve and run.

In a desperate attempt to salvage something from the situation the fight was immediately thrown open to spot

challenges. Five young men came forward and were dispatched by Baloch in a series of spectacularly vicious kills. In his sixth fight he was decapitated on the first pass by a pale woman with short-cropped red hair. Nobody knew who she was or why, in the confusion that followed the victory, she slipped away without claiming the purse. If it occurred to anyone apart from their agents that two more of the Prime Division's star performers had been eliminated in bizarre circumstances, there was no real sign of it in the newscasts. A brief press campaign to find the 'Killer Queen of the Dreamdrome' reached a shrill crescendo, produced nothing and lasted only until the next top-item sensation.

The Doctor and Leela had been present in the Dreamdrome, in one of the executive viewing suites, on the night of the Maidenly-Baloch non-match. They had been the last-minute guests of the Hakai Corporation, one of the main sponsors of the duel that never was, and to begin with the Doctor had found the experience quite agreeable. To be fawned upon and to have your every word listened to and given more weight than it probably deserved was not something he was used to, and he found it seductive. In this corporate environment Leela was treated as a star in the making. While she was not regarded with the same respect as the Doctor, the business strategist behind her rise, she was still feted as a Prime Division prospect, a potential object of popular adoration and a source of major earnings. They listened to him, they admired her: the evening was going splendidly and the Doctor had enjoyed it all, right up until the spot challenges began to be fought out. That was when he stopped enjoying himself and when Leela stopped being bored by the whole experience.

A government minister, one of the other corporate guests of the Hakai Corporation, had suggested that Leela should join in the excitement. If she fought the vicious Baloch, he advised, there was: 'a huge audience just waiting to acclaim you. You would instantly become the most famous duellist on the planet.'

‘I have other plans for her,’ the Doctor said firmly. He had seen that Leela was in danger of being caught up in the moment and he had to intervene quickly before she got swept away by the general mayhem and blood-splattered insanity. ‘This primitive bloodbath is no part of my DDS.’

‘DDS?’ the minister enquired.

‘Duellist development strategy,’ the Doctor said, with what he hoped was the right degree of pompous arrogance needed to make such nonsense believable. ‘I’m taking on a stable of young duellists even as we speak. The intention is that they will complement Leela’s very particular fighting style. I have a unified strategy in the process of development and I am quietly confident of a great personal triumph. Our fighting school will soon be the most famous in the history of the noble contest.’

‘Oh come off it now,’ the minister scoffed. ‘You cannot possibly make such an extravagant claim. The noble contest is greater than any particular fight or any particular school of fighting. And it always will be.’ He held out his empty glass and an attendant filled it with bright yellow vine-flower wine. ‘This is the second-level yellow?’

‘Yes, sir,’ the attendant murmured.

‘I prefer the golden myself. The aftertaste is subtler,’ the minister said to no one in particular. ‘It’s not bad though.’ The attendant did not make the mistake of agreeing, or disagreeing, or making any sort of comment.

The Doctor looked down into the arena where Baloch had just slashed the hamstrings of his latest challenger and was now in the process of dancing round the crippled youth making delicately agonising cuts with his fast, blood-ribboned sabre. ‘I can see for myself the power of the noble contest,’ he said.

‘Baloch is something of an aberration,’ the minister agreed. ‘An entertainer, though. A crowd-pleaser. You have to admit he’s a crowd-pleaser.’

‘He has skill, Doctor,’ Leela said, watching Baloch intently, both in close-up on the main relay screen and directly down in the harshly lit fighting circle. ‘And he is not afraid.’

‘Does that make him a warrior I wonder?’ the Doctor said. ‘Or simply a psychopath with no imagination.’ But Leela was not to be provoked.

‘It makes him hard to beat,’ the minister opined. ‘Is that why you have other plans for your pretty young fighter?’

The Doctor had observed the way everyone deferred to this man and had surmised that he was probably not someone to be antagonised unnecessarily and so he smiled his most charming smile and said, ‘You have seen through me, minister.’ He lowered his voice confidentially. ‘The truth is I’m not sure she’s ready for the likes of Baloch. And I wouldn’t want...’ His eye was drawn to one of the subsidiary relay screens and he was momentarily distracted by a close-up sequence of the brutal antics going on in the arena.

‘You wouldn’t want to waste an earning asset by cashing it in too early,’ the minister murmured. ‘I quite understand. I would feel exactly the same in your position. We think alike you and I. We have a lot in common. We could be brothers.’

Although he knew it was the drink talking the Doctor was irritated by the man’s thoughtless cruelty and he was sorely tempted to point out that they had nothing whatsoever in common, not even their basic physiology, but he was forestalled by the arrival of a slim, dark-haired young woman.

‘Sita, my dear,’ the minister greeted her warmly. ‘You’re late. You’ve missed a major part of the entertainment.’ He looked past her. ‘Where is your father?’

‘He sends his apologies. He’s unwell. A virus he thinks.’

‘Hung over more like,’ the minister chortled. ‘It was an excellent lunch we had yesterday.’ He glanced towards the Doctor. ‘May I introduce Sita Benovides, the daughter of an old friend.’

The Doctor was still unsure of the protocol of greetings: in this case was he supposed to shake her hand, kiss her on the cheek, or bow perhaps? He decided to take his cue from the minister and make no physical contact with the young woman. He merely doffed his hat and beamed at her. ‘I’m delighted to meet you, Sita Benovides. I’m the Doctor.’

‘I know who you are,’ she said. ‘I imagine most people do, don’t they?’

‘Was the case really that high profile?’ the Doctor said. ‘If I’d realised how many people were watching I might have been nervous.’

‘You don’t strike me as the nervous type,’ she said.

‘The Doctor has plans to dominate the noble contest,’ the minister smiled. ‘I admire that sort of ambition in a man. I think he and I are going to be the best of friends.’

‘He is a good friend to have,’ the young woman said to the Doctor, though she was looking directly at the minister. ‘Like his taste in wine, his loyalty can always be relied upon.’

Once again the Doctor was aware of how threatening people seemed to find this man. Even the daughters of old friends were careful in his presence. That’s certainly one definition of a friend; he said.

‘Is there another?’ the minister asked.

‘There are many others,’ the Doctor said. ‘Nothing is absolute. Only nothing is absolute.’

Leela who had been completely absorbed in watching the duels and was paying no attention to the comings and goings in the viewing suite interrupted the conversation abruptly. ‘Look, Doctor,’ she said, ‘the next challenger is a woman.’

In the arena a bloodied bundle of flapping tissue and flopping entrails was removed from the fighting surface and a pale woman with short-cropped red hair stepped forward to face the maniacally gleeful Baloch.

Chapter Nine

Sita set out to find whoever-it-was and she was fairly sure she had found the track and traced them back: from the ersatz battle zone of the 'Space Main security perimeter, to the burned corpses in the wood, to the downed gun-ship and the general destruction on the motorway. But there the trail stopped.

She had risked her cover to check with sources in the police and in the security services and find out what the story was: only to be told that there was no story. The incidents were just incidents, random and unconnected. Stuff happens. Look for causes and you'll go crazy. Look for links and you are crazy. She couldn't believe that was what they believed, except that they wouldn't lie to her, not all of them anyway, not all at the same time. Different departments, different investigation teams, different computers, same conclusions: file under accidental scuffle-up, and forget it.

Now while Major Sita Benovides was decidedly annoyed by what had happened, and she was given to bearing grudges, still she might have let it end there, left it and got on with her career. But then Lars 'Driftkiller' Ronick laughed at her.

No one had ever been sure whether Driftkiller got his nickname because of his sea hunter ancestry or simply because he was a lame-brained throwback with all the subtle wit of an explosive harpoon. 'Let me explain some things to you, girlie,' he said. 'One,' he held up a chubby finger. 'Fart at one of those security 'copters and it'll go down in flames. Two,' a second finger waved at her. 'Get a half-baked gun club round the old camp fire with enough booze and as much explosive ammo as they can carry, and what you end up with is a fully-baked gun club. And,' he waggled a short fat-rolled thumb, this time without bothering with the count, 'as for

that bunch at Aerospace Main - one got wiped? Scuff me, I'm amazed they could count well enough to figure that out. Gods-in-a-runner you officer-class types are a laugh riot.' And then he shook his head and laughed riotously.

'Is that three things or four, Driftblubber?' Sita asked coldly, but it was too late for effective counter-punching. She hated to be laughed at, but what really got to her was that 'girlie'. It made her angry enough to check everything again, and again, until she finally came up with one interesting anomaly.

She found a booking hostess at Aerospace Main who was sure she recognised the name of one of the dead men from the wood. He was not on the ticket computer of course though this was not altogether surprising Sita thought, because by the time the hostess met him he had already been dead for twenty-three hours. Despite this the girl stuck to her story. She remembered distinctly that Norbert Lung, *the* Norbert Lung, had left on a flight to the OTS. She remembered because she had discovered afterwards that there was no *the* Norbert Lung.

'He was just an any old Norbert Lung. He wasn't famous at all, he was a super-rich arse playing games. I tell you, because they've got more money than you can shake a stick at, and they buy themselves a top-rate ticket, they think that gives them the right to make a fool of you.'

'What did his ID say he was?' Sita asked.

'Was?'

'What was his listed occupation?'

The girl looked uncomfortable. 'I don't remember.'

'But he claimed to be famous,' Sita persisted. 'A famous what?'

'I don't remember, all right? Look have we finished?' She pushed her cup away and got up from the rest room table. 'Only I'm due back on shift.'

'This is just between us you know. It's not official or anything.' Sita tried to look hurt and slightly vulnerable. 'I need to trace this man.'

'Why?'

'It's personal,' Sita said. 'The bastard took advantage. He made a fool of me too and I'm not going to let him get away with it.'

The girl sat down again. 'I never saw his ID,' she said, lowering her voice. 'I should've done. I'm supposed to check everyone but with all this *don't make a fuss 'cause I'm famous* rubbish I was... I don't know...' She shrugged.

Sita nodded sympathetically. 'Don't feel badly about it. The man's toxic-drain scum,' she said, thinking he didn't want you to see an ID because he didn't have one or because what he had didn't fit him. And the dead man had not been super rich, not rich at all. But what was really odd was the total absence of Norbert Lung on any travel records. He wasn't on any of the computers. That was slightly creepy if you thought about it. Assuming the booking hostess was right and there was no guarantee that she was. There was no evidence to support her...

As the girl left to go back to the projection cubicle that put her real-time image behind a dozen interactive check-ins, Sita was beginning to regret asking questions. She had the uncomfortable feeling that she might be better off not knowing what she was finding out.

Leela was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with what the Doctor was doing. He had what he called an 'office' now, which as far as she could see was a cluster of rooms with a lot of unnecessary seating and decorations and many elaborate communications devices. He had even had the TARDIS brought to this office. 'You can get anything done if you know the right people and have enough money to pay them,' he had told her. She was not sure what money was but it was clearly valuable. But the Doctor had not given money to the right people because he did not have any. This did not matter because he had credit, which was money he promised to give the right people. She could not see how he could do that if he did not have the money already. Where did this strange money come from to begin with? Did just promising to give it to the right people make it appear? And if

it was that easy to produce how could it be valuable? It was all very puzzling but there were more important problems to worry about.

More worrying than the puzzle of the Doctor's magical money was what he had done with the TARDIS. He had it placed among the decorations in one of the rooms of the office and he showed it off to visitors as if it was an interesting relic that might once have been holy to a powerful shaman such as him but was no longer of importance. Of course Leela had long ago put all superstitious nonsense behind her, but she still felt that it was in some way tempting the unseen power to treat the TARDIS in this way. It may not have been magic, in fact it was not magic, obviously, because there was no such thing as magic, but the TARDIS was beyond understanding and so should be treated with respect otherwise who knows what might happen. The Doctor certainly did not as he had shown more than once.

But there was something worse than the Doctor's careless attitude to the TARDIS that was making her more uncomfortable. What really bothered her was that the Doctor seemed to have changed his mind and had settled into this world. He was involving himself enthusiastically in the world of duelling, which before he had claimed to despise. He called himself an agent now and he was already representing seven fighters and her. He was always in his office talking through the communications devices, making plans with other agents, making arrangements to stage duels. After all he had said about how uncivilised it was to take pleasure in fighting, he was saying now that she should fight simply to entertain people. She had tried to argue with him, to remind him that she was a warrior not a brawler, or a 'scuffler' as these people called them, but he would not listen. He told her not to worry, that he had a plan, that he would explain when he had time only he never seemed to have time. Meanwhile he wanted her to get on with training his other fighters because people liked to watch the training. Some wanted the chance to join in. Warriors did not train so that people could watch them or fight with them. And how could that be part of a

plan? The truth was she did not believe he had a plan. She was almost sure he was doing what he always seemed to do: he was enjoying himself finding out about things while he waited to see what would happen. As far as she could see that was as much of a plan as he ever had and it was no plan at all: it was just a way of looking at things. She had even heard the Doctor refer to what he did as 'casual science', by which he seemed to mean enjoying himself finding out about things while he waited to see what would happen...

But while Leela was not sure about what it was that the Doctor was doing, she was sure about what he was *not* doing. He was not making any attempt to keep his promise to the unpleasant Jerro Fanson and try to find the coward Keefer and warn him of the danger he was in. Well, like the Doctor she had given her word but unlike him she intended to keep it. A warrior, unlike a shaman, was bound by the given word. She had distrusted Jerro Fanson and, from what she had been told, his fighter was as untrustworthy as he was himself, but it made no difference to the promise. It was who gave their word that mattered, not who they gave their word to. As the warrior trainer had said: character is what you do when nobody is looking.

She had thought long and hard about how she should approach the search for a duellist who had run away and hidden himself in a world she was not familiar with. There was only one way that she could think of. No matter what the world was, no matter what the quarry was, the basics of the chase were always the same in her experience. The ways and places of hiding were limited and there was always a trail that led to them. The most difficult part of any hunt was finding the first spore, the first sign of the trail.

She decided she would have to pretend that, like Keefer, she too was in trouble and afraid. She would then ask the other fighters she was training with what they could do to help her to run away and hide herself. Among the options they gave her it might be possible to spot the first trace of the running man.

For those on the interplanetary grand tour there was little to recommend Piran. It may have been the largest known planetary satellite, but to them it was still just a frozen, featureless, minor curiosity. Most did not bother to go down to the surface, hidden as it was in a dense brown haze and with nothing to offer when you got there but robot mine heads and the crowded and violent pressure-domed work camps. The tourists had not endured the expensive discomforts of long-haul space travel to watch the brutal processes of mineral extraction. They had come to this large but unexciting moon simply to look directly from its orbit at one of the astonishing sights of the system.

So it was that, while the ship off-loaded plant, equipment and replacement workers into a succession of landing shuttles, the rich gawped in idle fascination at the ice-and stone-ringed, hydrogen giant that was the planet Geewin.

For the richest among the rich there was a special shuttle to take them to a geostationary orbit hotel, whose accommodations afforded unparalleled views of the huge planet. The waiting list for the meanest of rooms was five years long and getting longer all the time.

The story was that when this hotel was new and very fashionable the Lady Hakai had stayed there. This they said was why, when she finally withdrew from human society, she came to Geewin. It seemed unlikely to Keefer that the third richest person in all the settled worlds, and the richest woman in the history of the race, would ever have visited a tourist hotel no matter how fashionable it was. Whatever the reason though, her space-yacht, the mighty *Ultraviolet Explorer*, did wander among the moons of Geewin. And Reefer's immediate problem was to find it and get on board.

'What's your interest in her?' the shuttle pilot had asked.

'I'm interested in money,' Keefer said. 'And she's got more than her fair share of it.'

'She's got more than your fair share and my fair share and most everyone else's fair share summed and squared, but that doesn't answer my question.' The pilot finished scrolling through the shuttle manifest on his control screen and

entered his acknowledgement without bothering to conceal the code.

'I asked you first,' Keefer said and gave him another large denomination currency note.

'There's nothing very secret about it.' The young man tucked the cash away and grinned smugly. 'UVX runs a more or less routine series of orbits. She'll be somewhere around Dreen or thereabouts right now.' He flicked on his navigation plot. 'Yeah, there you go,' he confirmed and pointed at the display. 'You could have had that information for nothing.'

Keefer didn't smile. 'It was information about you I was buying,' he said and turned back towards the passenger section.

The pilot could not resist it. 'How do you mean?' he asked.

Keefer looked back at him. 'It was a test. You scuffled it up. It's going to cost you big.'

The pilot was not fazed. 'You rich boys never could take a joke.'

Keefer smiled now. 'We rich boys don't have to.'

As he went back through the cabin and took his seat he wondered if he had overplayed his fist, but then he remembered what Jerro had told him that time he almost set up the fight with Razorback Turner: 'An empty fist can't be overplayed, kid, it's impossible. That's like bad publicity: a contradiction in terms.'

Keefer tightened the seat straps and waited for the motors to kick in and punch the shuttle sub-orbital. He had watched earlier ones leave the deep-space transport so he knew that the trip down was unlikely to be smooth. He was not the only one. He could smell the fear-sweat on the other six people crammed into the cramped pressurised section. On five of them at least. Perhaps the woman had not bothered to find out what to expect, or perhaps she was tougher than the men. Pale skinned, with her red hair cropped close to the skull, she was as hard faced and whiplash lean as the rest of the contract work crew, but there was something else about her, a cold watchfulness, that was different. For a moment Keefer felt he should know her, that they had met

somewhere. They couldn't have done of course. He had been told that the six were an established team scheduled to replace a full crew killed in an air-lock failure. Such losses were routine it seemed since that accident had happened during the time the transport had been en route. Either someone was a lucky guesser, or they always shipped out plenty of replacement workers because that would be cheaper than heavy-duty safety systems.

There was no warning from the flight deck before the shuttle disengaged. The noises from the hydraulic rams and the abrupt slamming of airtight hatches vibrated through the fabric of the craft, murmuring into the air of the compartment as faint, disorientating echoes.

'Last scuffling time I fly with this outfit,' one of the men said. 'The in-flight service stinks. No bastard tells you what's happening. And where's the finger snacks and drinkies?'

'I'd give up a bollock for a drink right now,' another said.

'You couldn't spare one.' This from the woman.

'You could,' the man guffawed at her.

'She could spare two,' another of the men said, 'both of them yours. That's after she rips your lungs out.'

The man had stopped laughing. 'She knows I didn't mean anything by it. You know that don't you?'

'Yes,' the woman said without looking at him. 'I know that.'

'I mean I'm not stupid,' he said. 'I'd have to be seriously stupid wouldn't I!'

'All right you've made your point,' she said and shot him a look that silenced him.

'I blame the tourist for all this,' one of the others said and glanced across at Keefer.

'What for?'

'He's rich, I don't scuffling need a reason.'

It was a joke but there was a challenge in the tone that Keefer recognised and without looking at the man he said flatly, 'Yes you scuffling do, scuffwit.'

Everyone fell silent for a moment and looked at him. Everyone except the watchful woman, who carefully showed no interest: who showed unmoved and watchfully unmoving.

And that was it. That was what was different about her, why he had thought he knew her. It was not who she was he recognised, it was what she was. The woman was a duellist, small-time maybe, local spot challenges or next-day Guild agreements, but formal: a contract duellist rather than some kick-arse psycho scuffler.

The shuttle motors cut in suddenly, carrying the tense silence away. The abrupt humming in the fuselage quickly leapt to a howling and a bone-scratching rattle as the shuttle plunged through the upper levels of Piran's thickly poisonous atmosphere. The noise built and the rattle became wrenching and both kept increasing until everything was overwhelmed and there was one pulverising sensation of sound and movement. Still the shuttle fell on, and bucked and shuddered and roared crashing through the fiercely freezing pressures crushing down towards the surface.

When the vertical thrusters finally dropped the heaving craft into the dome, none of the passengers moved or made a sound. The sprung landing deck absorbed the last of the shuttle's energy in a series of sickening lurches, the dome above it clanged closed and the recycling pumps clattered into action.

'Scuffling scufflers,' someone said eventually. 'I'll need a liftload of money before I do that again.'

'If you've lost your nerve there's nowhere safe to go,' Meta said and pressed his attack, slashing the blunted training sabre against Leela's marginally weaker left side. 'Nowhere safe to hide.'

She parried the hit and he pivoted, aiming a full strength forearm smash at her face. She avoided the blow easily enough but Leela was abruptly conscious that the young fighter was suddenly much more aggressive. He dropped low, and using both hands, swung the sabre at the back of her knees. Meta was not one of the strongest of the trainees, too timid to be a natural duellist, but just the suggestion that she might be weakened in some way and he had turned into a pale version of the dead butcher Baloch.

Leela leapt the blade and as its momentum carried through and unbalanced the swivelling Meta she kicked him hard on the upper thigh. He went sprawling and she was fairly sure his leg would already be numb and would soon start to ache badly.

The crowd watching from the specially erected viewing stand applauded enthusiastically and a chant of 'Leela, Leela, Leela' broke out.

Leela ignored them and went to help Meta to his feet. 'Ouch,' he said, smiling apologetically. 'That'll teach me to get carried away.'

'You will get carried away feet first,' Leela said, 'if you want to kill more than you want to win.'

Meta was trying to rub the feeling back into his leg. 'I'm still not convinced that they'll let us do one without the other,' he said. 'The Rules of Attack haven't changed.'

'That is why I am making plans to run and hide,' Leela said quickly. 'It may be that I will not need to go but if the New Way fails I do not intend to be put on trial again.'

'Then it's the Hakai or nothing,' Meta said.

'The Hakai?' Leela asked.

Meta groaned and began hobbling around in a small circle. 'What did you do to my leg?'

'The pain will pass,' Leela said.

He continued to hobble about. Some of the crowd began to clap derisively and there were some whistles and boos. 'If you want to invite one or two of them down and give them a kicking I'm ready to watch and learn.'

Leela said, 'It will pass more quickly if you stand still and act as if it has already passed.'

'Be a man, Meta? You sound like my mother.' The crowd were clapping and booing more loudly now. 'Actually they sound like my whole family. Let's have them all down one at a time, you can kick their arses and I'll clap and boo.'

'What is this Hakai you speak of?' Leela asked.

'The Hakai OTS,' Meta said. 'You know what they say: no matter what you do, if you can reach the Hakai OTS you're home free.'

‘You mean you would be safe there?’

‘If you’re going to book, better get me a ticket too. I’m never going to be a crowd-pleaser am I?’ He smiled and did a couple of practice swings with the training sabre. ‘I don’t suppose you’d let me win the next one?’ he asked hopefully.

The return to gravity would be a relief eventually, but for the moment it was painful, it dragged on you and it made your joints ache. It took time, too, to get used to the damp, brackish smell that the industrial-size air scrubbers always gave off. Keefer stood waiting, trying not to let discomfort distract him. He couldn’t afford to be careless now.

The cargo clerk processed his temporary landing permit slowly and with a maximum show of bureaucratic reluctance. ‘How long you planning to stay?’

‘Like I said,’ Keefer said. ‘I don’t know.’

‘I can’t enter that.’

‘What can you enter?’

‘How long you’re planning to stay.’

Cash would have speeded things up but Keefer was in no hurry. He wanted his travelling companions to be long gone by the time he was allowed to follow them out of Baseport One and into the Pleasure Pits. A couple of the men had been looking for a fight and the whole team was ready to see the woman humiliate him.

‘It depends on what there is to see,’ Keefer said.

The clerk scratched himself. ‘Nothing,’ he said, ‘if all you want to do is look. We’re not running a zoo here.’

‘Not long then.’

‘I can’t enter that.’

The Doctor hadn’t told Leela of his plan in any detail because, if he was honest, he didn’t really have much of a plan. Not in any detail. Not what you could call a fully formed plan, anyway. In fact what he was actually doing was rather enjoying himself while he was finding out about things and more or less waiting to see what happened. There was nothing wrong with that approach of course, but it did

require patience, which was not one of Leela's more obvious virtues.

The Doctor did feel a little guilty about some aspects of what he was doing. Or rather what he wasn't doing. It wasn't that he was distorting the truth exactly, and he certainly wasn't lying. He was, however, allowing various people to draw their own conclusions about things without correcting them when they were wrong. Technically they were lying to themselves and he was letting them. That did not make him a liar as such, did it? Not a liar as such. After all there were worlds that he had visited where it would have made him a perfectly respectable lawyer, or a politician or an entertainer. On this world it was obviously a useful skill if you wanted to be an agent representing a stable of young duellists: particularly if you had no intention of letting any of them fight.

He smiled at the man on the communicator viewscreen and said, 'I'd be honoured to be a member of the Guild, of course I would, but I understood that I was not qualified to join.'

The Enforcer of the Guild of Agents smiled back at him. His smooth, round face glowed with friendly good-fellowship. 'If anything you're overqualified,' he said. 'The way you've been promoting that girl of yours is nothing short of inspired. She's going to be system-wide, bigger than Coodar ever was. Leela is going to be a brand to be proud of.'

The Doctor was slightly taken aback. 'Yes, I've always found her quite challenging,' he said, and wondered whether he had let his enthusiasm get the better of him.

'There you go, you see,' the Enforcer chortled. "I've always found her quite challenging." Brilliant! What can I say.'

'Brilliant's fine,' the Doctor said.

'You're a natural.'

'So I've been told.'

'All we need is your official ID and we're very much in business,' the Enforcer said. 'And I may say it's going to be profitable business. Profitable for us and profitable for you. Mostly profitable for you, of course.'

‘Of course,’ the Doctor said. ‘I’ll see what I can do and I’ll get back to you shall I?’

‘There isn’t a problem with that is there?’ the Enforcer asked politely.

‘With what?’ the Doctor asked.

The Enforcer looked slightly embarrassed. He leaned forward so that his face filled the viewscreen. ‘With asking for your official ID?’ he murmured delicately.

It was obvious to the Doctor that the Enforcer already knew the answer to that question. He must have done some background checks and naturally he had drawn a blank. ‘My official ID? There is a slight problem with that, yes. I haven’t got one at the moment.’ The Doctor contrived to smile and look depressed both at the same time.

The Enforcer shook his head and tutted sympathetically. ‘Another bureaucratic foul-up. I tell you if we ran the Guild the way they run state security...’ He shook his head again.

‘There was some sort of mix-up,’ the Doctor said, ‘when Leela and I were first arrested. Now no one seems to know who I really am. It’s potentially very embarrassing.’

‘And potentially very expensive,’ the Enforcer agreed. ‘Hard to enforce contract terms if you don’t officially exist. And if you’re not a member of the Guild.’

‘Exactly,’ the Doctor said. ‘So if...’

‘So, if you have a talk with your friend the minister, presumably he can sort that out sharper than sparks from a wet skullcap.’

‘My friend the minister?’ The Doctor wracked his brains as to who that might be.

‘I saw you with him at the Baloch debacle,’ the Enforcer said. ‘The State Security Minister?’

‘The minister,’ the Doctor said. ‘Of course. My friend the minister.’

‘A charming man, I’ve always liked him,’ the Enforcer said, clearly lying through his teeth.

‘He and I are going to be very good friends,’ the Doctor said and beamed delightedly. ‘He admires my ambition and I admire his taste in very good friends.’

‘No problem getting your ID sorted out then.’

‘Go straight to the top,’ the Doctor said. ‘Always a good plan.’

‘I’ll expect to hear from you soon,’ the Enforcer said.

‘You will,’ the Doctor agreed, ‘you will,’ and thought: you will expect to hear from me soon, I mean. That’s not a lie is it, not technically? Or am I lying to myself, he thought. I must get on with finding Keefer so that we can leave soon, he decided. This place is probably not good for Leela...

When finally he felt he had wasted enough time, Keefer paid the bribe and made his way through the freight-control galleries and out into the rest-and-recreation domes. It was obvious whoever had named these the Pleasure Pits was a PR talent with a sour sense of humour. A poorly lit network of narrow link-tubes connected half a dozen basic containments. No attempt had been made to disguise the crude prefabricated structures or differentiate them much except for colour-coding the entrance bulkheads. There was a communal eating area serviced by automatic food synthesisers old enough to qualify for a nostalgia park back home; an association room boasted little more than seating and off-focus tri-dee; in the sports hall there were a few hand-eye games tables and some broken down exercise stimulators; sleep and washrooms looked like the worst kind of low-maintenance public provision. As he wandered around loosening and flexing his joints and trying to look like an aimless tourist at the same time, Keefer could understand why the only area that was doing any business was a makeshift lasersound saloon. He stood outside it watching the light patterns for a moment, blinking slowly to make his vision sharp, and then he drifted in among the jostling customers.

Despite regulations, alcohol was freely on sale, and judging by the expressions on a few of the faces even some of the more expensively manufactured alternatives were available. Keefer got himself a pale beer from the cash pump and sat down at a corner table.

'You rich boys can't drink worth a scuffle either.' The shuttle pilot swayed slightly and grinned down at him. 'Or do you hire people to do your drinking for you?'

'What's your problem with us rich boys?' Keefer asked.

'Nothing money wouldn't cure.'

'Buy you a drink?' Keefer suggested.

'Got one.'

'You want to sit down then?'

'Prefer to stand,' the pilot said, swaying more violently.

'You might prefer it,' Keefer said, 'but can you do it?'

The pilot leaned down close and slurred, 'How much would you pay me to get you onto the *Ultraviolet Explorer*?'

Keefer could smell the drink on the man's breath but not as strongly as he had expected, and the half-closed eyes were clear. 'Why would I want to?' he asked.

The pilot sat down, leaned his elbows on the table and peered at him owlishly. The whispering flutes of the laser columns blared suddenly and the light shattered into plasma bubbles, which danced across the room. 'None of my business,' he shouted above the music. 'I can get you on board, for a price. What you do once you're there is up to you.'

Keefer waited for the sound to die down again and murmured, 'I could be an assassin for all you know.'

'Or care,' the pilot said. 'Like I say, what you do once you're there is up to you.'

Keefer shook his head. 'Not interested.'

'Cost you a thousand,' the pilot persisted. 'Special price. Because I like you.'

'And you'd want cash of course.'

'Dollars. Sumanan preferably. Same as before.'

'No.'

'Or you could just hand over the money anyway.' The pilot opened his tunic slightly so that the small handgun in his shoulder holster was clearly visible. 'What do you say?'

It was a speculative threat, little more than a fishing expedition, and it produced no combat response in Keefer, only a tired sort of contempt. 'I thought they were illegal out

here,' he said. Unless the man's reactions were very fast indeed he knew he could disarm him easily, kill him more easily still. He let a little of his contempt show as he remarked matter-of-factly: 'Leave it where it is and you won't have a problem.'

A flicker of doubt showed on the pilot's face. 'A man with a gun doesn't have a problem,' he said, his speech abruptly more slurred, 'in my experience.'

'What experience is that?'

He shrugged. 'Stuff happens. You need to be careful.'

'Is that a threat?' Keefer asked, knowing that it no longer was.

The pilot shook his head and held up his hands in mock supplication. 'Dangerous place is all,' he said. 'You know that crew you came in with is dead? Did you know that?'

Keefer thought the man must be talking metaphorically, statistically maybe. 'How do you mean?'

'Transporter failure.' The pilot slapped his hands together, palms flat. 'Implosion. Pressure smashed them to smears.'

Oddly unsurprised Keefer found himself thinking that the redheaded duellist had been wasted because she had died without anyone earning. 'Doesn't sound like a gun would have helped,' he said. Now the image of the android assassin came vividly back and it reminded him of the urgency of what he was about. It had taken him a long, slow time to get this far. His strength was the counterattack but this one had lost its edge, and he realised with a sickening thrill that he had let himself relax. It might already be too late. He might already be dead.

'You can't fight a computer malfunction,' the pilot was saying. 'Makes it more important to protect yourself when you can protect yourself.'

'How soon can you get me on board the *Ultraviolet Explorer*?' Keefer asked.

The driver who had kidnapped her and the Doctor when they first left the Court of Attack lock-up was called Nenron, and Leela had found him to be eager to do anything she asked of

him. He could not be persuaded that, as she was a warrior, she would never have killed him just because he offended her dignity, and so he clearly felt he owed her his life. He was also grateful, so he said, for the training she was giving his son, Benron. As far as he was concerned she had spared his own life and was protecting the life of Benron, and whatever he could do for her was small by comparison and was never enough.

‘I could buy you an open cash ticket to anywhere in the high deep,’ he said. ‘No eyes, no whys. And you wouldn’t need to go near ‘Space Main unless you needed to use it. Let me at least go and do that for you?’

‘No eyes, no whys?’ Leela asked, puzzled.

‘No name. No ID. Nothing on the ticket to identify you in advance.’

They were sitting in the runner that Nenron had borrowed for the day but he made no move to start it and take Leela to the spaceport as she had asked.

‘I wish to visit Aerospace Main myself,’ Leela said. ‘There are other things I want to find out about. It is not just the Hakai Orbital Station.’

‘I can find out about them for you,’ he urged. ‘What are these things? I’ll find out whatever you want to know. Just tell me. Give me a list.’

Leela still did not entirely trust Nenron despite his eagerness to please. Or maybe it was because of that. ‘They are private matters,’ she said flatly.

‘Well they won’t be private for long,’ Nenron said. ‘Not if you turn up at ‘Space Main asking about one-way tickets out and whatever else it is you think you can keep to yourself in front of a scuffling great crowd.’

‘Did you get me the likeness you promised?’ Leela asked.

‘The likeness?’

‘You said it would be no problem for you with your connections at the Court of Attack.’

‘The likeness. Yes. Yes I got it for you.’ He fished around in one of the runner’s utility boxes. ‘It was harder than I expected,’ he said. ‘For an up-and-comer, there was nothing

much about him. It was almost like he didn't exist.' He finally found what he was looking for and handed the small holographic picture back to her. 'I had to call in a few favours and I finally got it from the First Kill Archive. He was registered, but that was the only place. What was he, a friend or something?'

Leela looked at the picture of Keefer. He was half smiling and his eyes were watchful, even as he posed for what was obviously some sort of official picture. 'You speak of him as if he was a dead man,' she said, as she put the picture in her combat pouch.

'Something's happened to him,' Nenron said. 'You know what they say: register your first win and there's no going back. Sooner or later someone's going to come for you. Looks to me like someone came for him.' He started the runner's drive and began to program the inboard links. 'This is such a bad idea,' he muttered, 'but if it's what you want then I'll get you there some way...'

'Why should there be a crowd?' Leela asked.

'Because you're Leela.'

'I know who I am,' Leela said.

Nenron nodded. 'So does everyone else.'

'That does not mean there will be a crowd,' Leela said. She looked out through the runner window at the empty street. 'I am here. There is no crowd out there.'

Nenron turned to look at her. 'You're not serious.'

Leela frowned. 'There is no crowd out there,' she repeated. She opened the runner door and got out. She walked round the runner, pausing a couple of times to wave in all directions and then she got back in again. 'You see,' she said. 'There is no crowd out there.'

'You don't know about it do you?' Nenron said. 'Your agent hasn't told you. This whole area has been cordoned off. He hired security and set up checkpoints. You've been living in a gated compound for a while now. Nobody in or out without clearance.'

‘Nobody in or out? You are saying I am a prisoner?’ Leela was shocked and then immediately angry. ‘I am a prisoner again?’

‘Not a prisoner,’ Nenron said hastily. ‘Not exactly a prisoner.’

‘You mean not technically,’ Leela snapped, conscious of how often those words, those truthless words were cropping up.

‘It’s working like a charm.’

‘What is working like a charm?’ Leela demanded. ‘I do not understand this.’

‘The Doctor does.’

‘The Doctor has no use for charms,’ Leela said. ‘He says they are not rational and without rationality there is only chaos and terror. I have not been allowed to keep any charms.’

Nenron stared at her intently. Eventually he smiled a small hopeful smile. ‘I can never tell whether you’re serious or not. I suppose that comes from your fighting technique doesn’t it? You keep your opponents guessing. Keep them off balance?’

Leela almost smiled at his clumsy attempt to divert her attention. ‘What is happening?’ she said very slowly and deliberately.

‘It’s classic showmanship,’ he said. ‘You whip up the public’s interest in something: in this case you. And then you cut them off from it. And then you tease them a bit with tantalising glimpses of what they think they want.’

‘The Doctor is tantalising them with glimpses of me?’

Nenron said, ‘And it’s working like a charm. Interest in you is higher than it ever was.’

‘You are right. He has told me nothing of this,’ Leela said. Was this the plan the Doctor had promised to tell her about when he had time? Was this the plan he was never going to tell her about because he knew she would not agree to it? How could this be a plan?

‘You’re going to make a killing. In a manner of speaking.’ Nenron was starting to babble. ‘I mean I know the New Way is not really about killing but there has to be an element -’

Leela interrupted him. 'Stop babbling old man and take me to Aerospace Main.'

Nenron sighed and nodded. 'Can I at least get you a less recognisable outfit?' he asked as he set the runner in motion. 'A bit of a disguise maybe?'

'Yes,' Leela said. 'I think so. If I do not wish to be recognised, a disguise would be sensible.'

Nenron said, 'If you do not wish to be recognised, not leaving the compound would be sensible.'

'I will let nobody make me a prisoner,' Leela said. 'No matter who they are or what their plan is.'

Chapter Ten

They found him in a crapper on the Hakai OTS,' he said. 'Dollar to a dip he was a hauler who got himself spotted.'

Driftkiller Ronick was a crude, fat, sexist pig, Sita thought, but there were worse cops. He had a long memory for incidents and he made the links when they showed. She paid for the gutburgers and joined him on the bench by the lake.

'How did you get hold of this?' she asked, running the ID he had given her through the fast-reader.

Driftkiller spoke round a mouth stuffed with most of a burger. 'Friends in low places.'

She shrugged to show her indifference. 'If you don't want to tell me...'

'Turned up in a currency bounce. Counterfeit crew. Good gear. They were working from plates stolen to order on the Hakai.'

She stopped the reader: it was the same routine stuff she'd got from central registry and it merely confirmed what she already knew. Norbert Lung was not the man who blew through 'Space Main security. 'None of this detail matched him at all?'

'All they had in common was your friend Norbert is dead and so was this one.'

'How dead?' she asked.

'Pro hit to the spine, then a coup to the brain.' Still chewing he pushed a chubby finger against the underside of his jaw. 'Neat blade.'

A dovetailed plover landed on the grass in front of them and Driftkiller tossed it some crumbs.

'Who was the dead man?' Sita asked.

'I asked that.'

'And?'

'They don't scuffling know. The body, all the forensics, all the samples, all the details - all disposed of.'

'How could that happen?'

'I asked that.'

'And?'

'Computer glitch,' he said dismissively. 'That's their story and they're sticking with it.'

A chilly breeze swirled across the lake. Sita suddenly shivered. 'You don't buy that?'

He snorted. 'Smells like Hakai public relations to me. Usual scam. No evidence, no investigation - no crime. Anybody asks: blame the computer. Killings are bad for the image, am I right?'

It sounded reasonable to Sita. So that was it then. Probably a courier: currency, drugs, biologicals, who knew? Serious hauler anyway. And they caught up with him in the low-rent public washrooms on the Hakai Orbital Transfer Station. Someone caught up with him there. Someone heavy and professional. And he's dead. Fitting sort of end for someone like him. End of trail. End of story. Did it sound reasonable? It sounded reasonable. There were holes... Forget the holes, she thought. Be grateful to Driftblubber here for getting her off an increasingly sharp-feeling hook. 'How did you make the connection?'

'Routine booking check. Norbert arrived on the OTS but he didn't leave. There was an unidentified corpse around that time.'

'Two and two,' Sita said.

Driftkiller nodded. 'Elementary police work.'

It was elementary police work Sita had already done, only there'd been no mention of a corpse when she checked. How could that have happened? She shivered again. 'And we've got nothing on the dead man at all?'

Driftkiller shrugged. 'Witness statement has him as some kind of slope.'

Sita frowned. Some kind of slope?

Catching the reaction Driftkiller elaborated: 'He looked like a dink seemingly; well what they said was: Western-zone features.'

Sita felt the hook bite hard again. It wasn't him. It wasn't her man. The corpse wasn't him. The bastard was still out there. She was very cold now. 'Thanks,' she said. 'I owe you one.'

Driftkiller was not impressed. 'Unhuh, like you plan to pay me back,' he said.

'Maybe I already have.'

'How's that?' Several ornamental waterfowl stomped up from the lake demanding to be fed and he tossed them some crumbs too.

Major Sita Benovides smiled thinly and said: 'By deciding not to pay you back?'

Sergeant Lars Driftkiller Ronick looked at her for a long moment then he laughed. 'You officer-class types talk a good fight, girlie,' he said, cramming a second burger into his mouth.

Leela had never seen anything quite like the Aerospace Main spaceport.

Nenron had used an official Court of Attack lock-up authorisation, which he was not supposed to have, to drive the runner directly into one of the more discreet access areas. He could have taken her through the normal entrance concourse, he explained, and because of who she was she would have been given the full VIP, as in Very Important Person, treatment, but with that would have gone the full crowd of curious onlookers. So he was pretending she was a VIP, as in Very Insignificant Prisoner, and was taking her in through the rule violators and minor lawbreakers holding cells. Leela was dressed as a cleaner, her disposable coveralls successfully concealing her Sevateem warrior garb, a protective hood and breathing filters bunched at her neck, already partially obscuring her face and available to hide it fully should the need arise.

Clearly Nenron was a familiar figure around the cells since he and the cleaner he was escorting were not challenged by any of the security guards as they made their way through the dingy corridors to one of the constantly descending elevator platforms that would take them down to the main public concourse.

When Leela stepped off the platform and into the huge, brightly lit underground complex, the first thing she was conscious of was the throng of seemingly lost and aimless people drifting backwards and forwards between shining information screens. People stared long and hard at these screens before reacting to what they were seeing. Eventually they responded singly, in pairs, in groups, and here and there in sudden small stampedes. Leela watched as they hurried up and down the moving pathways that linked floors on different levels. Each floor had its own identification screen at the point where the pathway reached it and some people hesitated there and caused small knots of confused congestion. It struck Leela that it was not a sensible way to arrange things. She felt a nudge in the back and tensed for an attack. She was surprised at how quickly she found herself primed and ready to fight. It was not how she had originally been trained. It was not warrior-like at all. It was as if she was looking for any excuse to fight. It must have been the latest training she had been doing with the other duellists. When she had trained as a warrior with other warriors it had not been like this. And yet the new training had not been so different. Perhaps it was the way she had been watched and cheered on by uninvolved people. Perhaps it was something to do with the way that made her feel.

Nenron nudged her in the back again. 'Come on,' he muttered.

'Cleansing staff are not supposed to stand around gawping. You're supposed to look as though you're here to work. We don't want to draw attention to ourselves.'

'You lead the way,' Leela said.

'The OTS concourse first?' he asked.

She nodded and they stepped out into the drifting crowd.

Probably because Nenron had been apprehensive about it, Leela found she was immediately uncomfortable getting so close to large numbers of people. Whenever she caught someone's eye she expected them to call out her name; she even half expected one of them might want to fight her. Ahead of her Nenron was hurrying towards one of the moving pathways. He was walking far too fast, she thought, dodging and swerving through the crowd, and if she kept up with him it was bound to make her conspicuous. Someone would look closely at her. Someone would recognise her. Someone would call her name. There would be crowds and chaos and terror. She slowed her pace to what she felt would look determined rather than frantic and panicky, determined and inconspicuous. She was confident that she could keep Nenron in sight without any problems. But as her warrior trainer had frequently told her there is a dangerous difference between being confident and being sure, and by the time she reached the moving pathway she thought he had taken, Nenron was nowhere to be seen.

Leela knew that confused hesitation is as conspicuous as headlong rush and so she stepped calmly onto the moving pathway and let it carry her down towards what she assumed must be the Orbital Transfer Station concourse. She had seen that most people stood still on the moving pathways and she was doing the same, when she was unsettled to find that a man had walked down and was standing beside her. For a moment she thought it might be Nenron but when she glanced at him she realised it was a stranger and that the glance had been a mistake.

He glanced back at her and then he stared more pointedly. Trying to make it look casual, as if she was getting herself ready to start work when she reached the end of the pathway, Leela pulled the hood of her coveralls up onto her head and settled the breathing mask and filters into place over her mouth and nose. Out of the corner of her eye she could see that the man continued to look at her and too late she noticed that the breathing filters in the mask were giving

off a faint and peculiar smell. She reached up to try and pull the mask away from her face but nothing happened. It was as though her hand was feeble and weak and the mask was stuck to her. And then she realised that her arm had not moved from her side. She had not reached for the mask at all. She reached again using her other arm and found that it too had not moved. Furious with herself she tried with both hands to pull the mask away from her face only to realise that both arms had remained unmoving at her sides.

‘There’s no point in fighting it,’ the man beside her said. He moved in closer and gripped her upper arm.

‘Let go of me,’ Leela snarled. ‘Get away from me or I will break both your arms and then both your legs.’

‘I know you can see and you can hear me,’ the man said, ‘but that’s all you can do. Anything else is just an illusion. Trust me I know about these things. I’m a professional.’

Leela could hear the self-satisfied smile in his voice but for some reason she found she could not turn her head to look at him. ‘You are a *dead* professional!’ she shouted at the top of her lungs.

‘Well that’s impressive,’ the man murmured. ‘I almost heard that. Whispering is better than most can manage at this stage. Stop fighting it you psycho-bitch scuffler or I will up the concentration and leave you to die right here, right now.’ He tugged on her arm and she pulled away from him with all her strength and furious anger. ‘I am Leela of the Sevateem and you will be sorry you laid a hand on me,’ she raged. As he pulled her against him, another man stepped into the gap on her other side and between the two of them they braced her into a standing position. ‘You know,’ she heard the first man say. ‘If the deal goes sour -’

‘Why should it go sour?’ the second man said.

Leela could not feel anything much now or move at all but just as the one with the self-satisfied smile in his voice had said, she could still see and she could still hear. It was like a bad dream.

‘I’m only saying if it does; if it does go sour for some reason.’

‘Like what?’

‘I don’t know.’

The two men were talking as if she was not there and Leela recognised that she must be truly helpless. These men had no fear of her. These men knew she was completely in their power. For a gasping moment she was breathless with terror. Helpless was not something she had been trained for. Helpless was the same as dead. It was worse than dead. Helpless was chaos and terror. But the moment passed and she drew breath again.

‘So why bring it up?’

‘I don’t know; I’m just saying if it does we could probably sell her on the open market and still come out ahead on the deal.’

The moment passed and Leela realised that while she could still see and hear and, most important of all according to the Doctor, while she could still think she was not helpless. Confident was not the same as sure, her warrior trainer had said, but in the same way captured was not the same as helpless. Had he said that? She could not remember, but if he had not said it he should have done.

‘She’s too high profile.’

The moving pathway had reached the floor it was linked to and the men stepped off with Leela between them. The three of them chatted amiably as they strolled on towards the far end of the concourse where the freight elevators were situated.

‘I still say she’s worth money either way.’

‘Leela? As seen on every scuffling screen in the entire scuffling system. What am I bid? You don’t think we might draw attention to ourselves?’

If anyone noticed that the cleaner was not contributing much to the conversation and that her feet were hardly touching the floor, they gave no indication of it.

‘I wasn’t suggesting an auction.’

‘So a one-off sale then. Available as slave or practice dummy, one Leela? Same problems.’

Leela stared ahead trying to pick up clues from her limited field of vision and listened to her kidnappers for any information that might turn out to be useful.

‘We don’t want to draw attention to ourselves.’

It seemed, Leela thought, the two men were professional enough not to give up any information accidentally. But there was something about those words: we do not want to draw attention to ourselves, that should remind her... It was only then that she remembered him and wondered what had happened to Nenron.

Since he had mocked up one of his own, the Doctor had become something of a connoisseur of offices and this, he felt, was a particularly fine example of the ostentatiously unostentatious. He assumed the few duelling artefacts that adorned the walls of the antechamber were authentically old and valuable, and the simple carpets and furniture were originals and the most perfect of their kind.

When he was eventually shown into the minister’s personal office it was similarly aching with good taste. The one apparent concession to the man, since it was an obvious expression of his power, was the heavy, ornately carved desk behind which he sat. The State Security Minister did not rise to greet the Doctor, but he smiled affably enough and gestured to a chair in front of the desk. ‘What can I do for you?’ he asked without preamble.

‘You have a wonderful office,’ the Doctor said smiling.

‘It’s not to everyone’s taste,’ the minister said modestly, ‘but I like it.’

‘The daughter of your friend, what was her name... you introduced her that night, Sita Benovides, yes that was it, she said you had excellent taste, but I had no idea.’ The minister’s expression darkened and the Doctor wondered if he had sounded insincere, but then he realised that it must have been the mention of the girl’s name that had caused the change.

The minister confirmed it when he said, ‘You would be wise to forget you ever met that young woman.’

‘I’ll do my best,’ the Doctor said. ‘If that is your best advice.’
The minister nodded. ‘It is. Now what can I do for you exactly?’

‘The development of my business is being hampered by the fact that I have no official ID. It was suggested that this might be as a result of an administrative error in the Ministry of State Security, though I know this is not the case.’ Interpreted in one way, that sounded like a vote of confidence in the minister’s department or at the very least an expression of friendly solidarity with the minister himself. The chances were that would be the way the man would hear it because that would be the way he wanted to hear it. Once again the Doctor was uncomfortably aware of the way truth and lies could simply be a matter of tone and phrasing. I’m not lying, the Doctor thought. I am not technically lying. I am not lying technically. And the man is a politician so he should know about these things. He is a professional...

The minister sighed. ‘I wish I had your confidence. You can’t get the staff you know. They just don’t seem to be out there any more.’ He pressed a button on his desk and two assistants, one male and one female, bustled in. ‘Arrange to have the Doctor rescanned and reissued with a full ID will you,’ he said to the man, and to the woman he said, ‘Is she waiting?’

‘Yes minister,’ she said.

‘Is everything in place?’

‘Yes.’

‘I want her kept waiting. But everything else is ready?’

‘Ready on full stand-by.’

‘Very well.’ The minister dismissed them with an imperious wave of his hand. ‘What were we saying?’ he said to the Doctor.

‘No staff out there?’ the Doctor suggested.

The minister nodded. ‘A changing world. Dark forces at work...’ His voice trailed off.

‘Dark forces?’ the Doctor prompted.

‘How’s the fighting school coming along?’ the minister said, ignoring the question as if it had never been spoken.

The Doctor resisted the urge to ask again what the minister had meant and instead smiled cheerily and said, 'Training and recruiting. Early days yet.'

'Speaking as a traditionalist,' the minister said, 'I'm still not sure I hold with these new-fangled ideas of yours.'

The Doctor contrived to look crestfallen. 'Oh dear. And I was hoping you could help me with a duellist I wanted to recruit. I'm having trouble contacting him.'

The minister smiled indulgently. 'I'm not running a communications network, Doctor. What's this fighter's name?'

'Keefer,' the Doctor said. 'I understand he's a well-thought-of young duellist who has no agent at the present time.'

The minister's expression did not change. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I can't help you with that.' His expression still did not change as he stood up, thus obliging the Doctor to do the same. 'If you see my assistant on the way out he'll deal with the ID for you.'

'I'm obliged to you, Minister,' the Doctor said, wondering what it was about the name Keefer that had caused the State Security Minister to react with such a determined show of not reacting. Curious that, and rather a pity. He had started to think that the whole Jerro Fanson mystery was not a mystery after all and now here it was again.

By way of farewell the minister said, 'I shall expect tickets to Leela's first formal match.' And the fixed, indulgent smile never left his face.

As he came out of the office the Doctor was surprised to find Sita Benovides waiting in the anteroom. 'Sita Benovides,' he said beaming at her widely, 'how nice to see you.' He leaned in closer to her and said in a theatrical whisper. 'Though I have been told to forget I ever met you. Why is that do you think?'

Sita drew back slightly and smiled a carefully cool smile. 'Perhaps whoever said it thinks I don't like you,' she said.

'What would give them that idea?'

She shrugged. 'Me?'

The Doctor laughed. 'I'm very charming when you get to know me,' he said.

'I'll try not to then,' Sita said.

The Doctor laughed again. 'Where is that nice young man who is arranging my new ID?' he said, looking around, and as if on cue both the assistants came into the anteroom.

'If you'd follow me, Doctor,' the man said.

As he followed the man out of the anteroom the Doctor heard the woman say to Sita Benovides. 'The minister apologises. He'll try not to keep you waiting much longer.'

Sita sat in front of the desk, keeping her expression neutral. She was furious with herself. It had been a mistake. Not the fact of it but mentioning the fact of it, especially to the State Security Minister. Sita couldn't believe she had been naive enough to trust the man.

'Your father has been at pains to point out,' he was saying, 'that there is no substantial evidence against you.'

It was that word 'substantial' that was the killer. It was a politician's word. Shifting and shifty: nothing real to confront, nothing substantial. Sita knew there was no evidence against her at all but that wasn't going to matter. Somebody didn't like her asking questions about the 'Space Main incident. It was the only explanation; there was nothing else. She was too ambitious to have taken any stupid risks: any *other* stupid risks. And now she'd blown everything on a whim. The brief official inquiry, remarkably brief as it turned out, had reached its conclusion, blame had been apportioned and the matter was closed. It was no concern of hers that the conclusion was incorrect. What did it matter? What mattered was that she had come out of the whole sorry mess with her career intact. She knew how the game was played: she'd been born to it. The youngest major in the security services, an undercover expert. Keeping quiet was like breathing. She stared at the minister, wondering whether letting him sleep with her would make any difference now. 'My father shouldn't have become involved,' she said.

The minister nodded. 'I'll do my best to protect him. I owe him that. It would have been better if he hadn't tried to lie but I suppose that was to be expected.'

Her father had lied? About what? And when? When had he been interrogated exactly? 'I'm sorry?'

'It's too late for apologies I'm afraid. Far too late.'

'When you say my father tried to lie... about what?'

For a moment he seemed genuinely irritated. 'Oh come now, the evidence against you isn't just substantial, it's overwhelming.' Then, as quickly, his expression changed and he sighed with professional regret. 'I can save your father: you I can do nothing for.'

'I'm facing a demotion...?' Sita suggested.

'I think the matter is rather more serious than that, Major Benovides,' the minister said coldly.

'Is it?' How serious could it be? What was she facing here?

The minister said, 'Corruption and murder? I think so don't you?'

Corruption and murder? She couldn't believe what she was hearing. Corruption and murder? That was way out of proportion. They couldn't make that stick. Not even the best interrogation controller could make her guilty of corruption and murder. She was almost relieved. She had been stupid, truly career-endingly stupid. But what mattered now was that whoever was behind this frame-up had been stupider and one day soon she was going to find them and make them eat it...

'Have you nothing to say for yourself?' the minister asked.

'Would you listen?' she asked.

The minister touched the antique button on his desk. 'No,' he said as two uniformed guards came into the office and stood behind her chair. 'There is nothing you can say that I would wish to hear.'

'Then I have nothing to say,' Sita said and stood up. While the guards were binding her hands behind her she found herself wondering whether there would ever come a time when she would regret not saying: you're a vain and stupid man with hideous taste in everything, especially wine and

decor. She had nothing much to lose now. But, then again, she had indulged herself once before when a man had irritated her and look where that had got her...

Chapter Eleven

‘Where is she?’ When he got back the Doctor had gone to look for Leela on the training ground only to find that she had left it earlier in the day. Soon afterwards it seemed she had left the compound altogether, driven away in a chauffeured runner. The security man on the gate had neither the authority nor the nerve to try and stop her. ‘Doesn’t anybody know where she went?’

The trainees glanced at one another and shrugged and shook their heads. Outside the weapons and therapy annexe where they were assembled, the Doctor could hear the crowd in the viewing stand beginning to slow handclap and boo and raise the occasional desultory chant of Leela, Leela, Leela.

‘She must have said something to someone,’ he pressed. ‘Don’t you ever talk to each other when you’re training? Surely you do.’ The young duellists looked sheepish and vaguely guilty, which rather puzzled him, so he waited without speaking. Silence he knew could be a very effective interrogation technique. Oh dear, he thought, am I interrogating these people? It was not my intention to become an oppressive authority figure. But you can’t pretend to be an authority figure without behaving oppressively, like an authority figure. And that was the trouble with pretending: do it well enough and nobody can tell you are, not even you, eventually...

It was Meta who finally broke the silence. ‘I think she was having second thoughts about...’ He waved his hand vaguely.

‘About what?’ the Doctor prompted.

‘The New Way,’ he said. ‘She asked me what a fighter could do if they wanted to run away and hide.’

‘She asked me that too,’ one of the others piped up.

‘And me,’ another said.

‘I think she was losing her nerve,’ Meta said. ‘I think -’

‘I think that is such crap,’ Benron interrupted angrily. ‘She was not losing her nerve. She is brighter and tougher and braver than any two fighters you can name.’

‘I can’t name two fighters who’ve run for it,’ Meta said.

‘Step out onto the practice ground and I’ll name you one,’ Benron challenged. ‘Right here, right now.’

So that was it, the Doctor thought. She got tired of waiting for me to do it and she’s set out to find Keefer herself. As Meta and Benron squared up to one another he stepped between them. Paying neither of them any attention he deliberately made the move look almost absent-minded. ‘So what did you all tell her?’ he asked.

Keefer thought it could still be some half-cocked scam to part him from the wad of cash he had flashed around, but somehow he doubted it. If the pilot intended to make a move his best chance had been while they were actually sneaking aboard the supply freighter. Even a scuffwit would realise that. Besides which, the man had finally introduced himself, as Melly Finbar, and it was Keefer’s experience that chancers didn’t offer names before they stepped up and tried for it.

‘Pick a silo,’ Finbar said, indicating the series of circular maintenance access plates in the floor of the freighter’s bulk cargo bay.

Keefer nodded at one in the centre and Finbar opened it using a hand-held remote override. They peered down into the wide-bodied tube. It was three-quarters full of some sort of light-coloured grains. Keefer reached down and scooped some up in his hand. ‘It’s lecea seed,’ he said disbelievingly.

Finbar grinned. ‘All the way from the wet-fields of home,’ he said, ‘in case the Lady Hakai gets nostalgic. And to feed the Fat Boys.’

‘You mean it’s real? It’s grown organically back home and shipped out?’

‘If you were the richest woman in the settled worlds would you settle for less than the real deal?’

Keefer rubbed the soft seeds in the palm of his hand. The genuine article was expensive back home; gods alone knew

what it was worth out here. Wealth was an abstract, meaningless sort of idea, and then occasionally you got a glimpse of what it could do.

‘It’s a good choice,’ Finbar was saying. ‘If you work your way into it it’ll help cushion you during lift-off.’ He took an inhaler from the medical supply locker and gave it to Keefer together with the remote. ‘Ship runs fully pressurised okay? So the breather’s only for emergencies. Gives you thirty minutes if you don’t panic.’

‘What about the altered mass?’ Keefer asked. ‘It’ll show on the launch check.’

‘Don’t worry, I’ll amend the cargo manifest. I’ll stick you in as a couple of cases of freeze-dried driftfeeders.’

Keefer pulled out the rest of the cash he was carrying. ‘Just so long as that’s not how I end up,’ he said and handed the money to Finbar.

‘This is more than we agreed.’

Keefer stepped down into the lecea. ‘Any last words of advice?’

‘Watch out for the Fat Boys. They’re faster than they look,’ Finbar said and pulled the gun.

The suddenness of the move and the speed of the draw took Keefer completely by surprise. He stayed perfectly still, cold and ready to kill when the chance to counterattack was offered.

Finbar grinned. ‘I practised that a lot,’ he said. ‘I’ve never actually fired the thing, of course.’ Still pointing the pistol in Keefer’s direction he checked it quickly and then flipped it over and handed it across butt first. ‘I think it works but take care where you use it. Don’t go punching holes in pressure walls. You don’t gain much of an advantage that way.’

It was a problem of his own making, but one of the Doctor’s difficulties was that he had developed feelings of responsibility towards his duellists. While they were in his imaginary school and he was their phoney agent they were safe enough, but what was he going to do with them? He had come to realise that his quixotic notion that he could effect a

change in attitudes towards duelling and then bring about a change in the Rules of Attack was just that: quixotic, he was tilting at windmills. What had he been thinking of? This world was not the way it was because of the efforts of one person, and it wasn't going to be changed by the efforts of one Time Lord, not even a brilliant one like him. In the meantime, Leela did not seem to be planning to report back - why did that not surprise him - and he was responsible for her too. When did he take on all these responsibilities, he wondered? *Why* did he take on all these responsibilities? He looked at the TARDIS standing ready in the corner of his ridiculous office. Perhaps he should go inside and relax for a while; give himself a chance to think. Once there he might even try a very small temporal adjustment, just the tiniest non-parallel non-fluxed shift, so he could start again. Given a second chance he might not get it right but he could get Leela and they could get out. Of course if it went wrong and he spun off into who-knows-where it wouldn't be his fault: he would just have been doing his best to put things right and... He smiled to himself: too late, he thought. 'If you're going to lie to yourself,' he said aloud, 'you do at least have to be convincing.'

He turned away from the TARDIS as Benron burst into the office and announced loudly, 'It was my father. I cannot believe it was my scuffling father.'

'What was your scuffling father?' the Doctor bellowed back.

Benron took the hint and lowered his voice slightly. 'It was my father driving the runner that Leela left in. That scuffling old scuffwit cannot keep out of my face.'

'At least he can tell us where he took her,' the Doctor said.

Benron shook his head. 'Not yet he can't. The runner's back but there's no sign of him anywhere.'

'Is that normal for him?'

'What would be normal for him? You saw him in action, waving empty guns about, taking you and Leela prisoner. Man's not the full dollar, never has been.'

Was that true, the Doctor wondered, was he unbalanced? He knew Benron and his father were not on the best of terms

but was it possible that Nenron could have been some sort of threat to Leela? And would she recognise the threat if there were one?

‘If he’s done something to cause her problems,’ Benron went on, ‘or put her in any sort of danger you can forget the New Way: I’ll kill him.’

‘Leela can take care of herself,’ the Doctor said, but the truth was he wasn’t sure that she could. He knew she didn’t really understand that she was a major celebrity, and the sort of clanger that might put her in. ‘Is there any indication in the runner where they might have gone?’

Benron looked puzzled. ‘How do you mean?’

‘Distance travelled? Route still in the computer?’

‘You don’t know much about runners do you?’

‘Not my area of expertise,’ the Doctor agreed.

‘If it’s a legal unit everything blanks when you park up. Unrecorded monitored movement: it’s a basic freedom.’

‘And if it’s not a legal unit?’

‘This one is,’ Benron said. ‘My father only uses legal runners. His authorisations might not stand up to scrutiny sometimes but his runners always do.’

‘Are you saying he’s a crook?’ the Doctor asked.

Benron shrugged. ‘He’ll do until one comes along.’

‘They spoke very highly of him at the Court of Attack lock-up,’ the Doctor said.

Benron shrugged again. ‘Lock-up administrators are not the brightest, and they’re not even the brightest lock-up administrators.’

‘What would you normally do if you wanted to find your father?’ the Doctor asked, and thought that without anything else to go on he would simply have to assume that Leela took the general advice of her fellow fighters and went to the spaceport to see if that was what Keefer had done. But he had already checked with the Aerospace Main authorities and if she had been there at all she certainly wasn’t there now. So where did they go next?

‘I wouldn’t,’ Benron was saying. ‘Normally I’d be glad to see the back of him. This time I’ve done everything I can think of and there’s nothing. It’s like he’s fallen off the world.’

Lift-off and the climb towards orbit was a harsh and howling horror, as rough as anything Keefer could have imagined. The flight down had been smooth by comparison. The elderly freighter heaved and surged as it screamed upwards, piggybacked on its rattling jump-booster. In the pitch-darkness of the silo the brutal G forces crushed Keefer down into the lecea seed, squeezing and deforming the makeshift acceleration couch that he had scooped out of it for himself. As the bracing moved, his spine was wracked and his joints were twisted and wrenched. His chest was squeezed, making breathing a relentless struggle to inflate his lungs. As consciousness collapsed the thought came to him that if this was what Finbar called a good choice, what in the names of all the gods would a bad choice have been like?

When weightlessness finally released him back to awareness and he sucked at a deep, shuddering breath he found himself abruptly enveloped in a gritty, suffocating cloud. Like him the individual grains of lecea had gone into free-fall. A fog of them filled his throat and he began to choke. He needed to get out of the silo quickly. He groped for the control remote. In the stinging blackness he fumbled with it. Suddenly it was gone. He tried to hold his breath as he searched around desperately. There was no sign of it. There was nothing, nothing except the thickening, suffocating lecea seed. He was close to panic now. It was impossible to fight his way out of this, there was no counterattack, there was no possible way to survive. He was dead.

He made a conscious effort and stopped moving. He struggled for the will to control himself. If he was going to die it wasn’t going to be like this, hopelessly trapped and helplessly terrified.

Now he remembered the inhaler. This time he was careful. After a couple of deep breaths he was calm and ready for the discipline that focused his senses. It took longer than normal

but when he finished he had suppressed all but hearing and touch. Within the scraping whisper of the seeds he reached for the difference and plucked the remote from its small, noisy orbit.

Once the plate was opened a slight reverse airflow kicked in and pulled the lecea back, allowing Keefer to drift out of the silo without taking half the contents with him. It seemed the in-flight inspection of bulk cargo was allowed for in the freighter's design: he only hoped it wasn't allowed for in the crew's routine as well.

'Corruption and murder?' Sergeant Lars Driftkiller Ronick narrowed his piggy little eyes so that they almost disappeared, and snorted contemptuously. 'Yeah very scuffling probable.'

Sita felt her wrist and ankle bands start to tighten and placed one of the wrist bands against a wall-mounted scanner plate. 'I'm touched by your good opinion of me,' she said.

Ronick grunted contemptuously. 'Don't be. Takes talent and balls to get away with heavy stuff like corruption and murder. You're short on both, girlie.'

'Get away with it?' Sita brandished one of the electronic restraints at him. They were all beginning to loosen now. Before very long they would routinely start to tighten again and failure to key in would keep them tightening until they amputated hands and feet. While she was awake they were time *and* space sensitive. 'I face the interrogation controllers tomorrow. How does that shape up as getting away with it?'

'And you're supposed to have committed these offences when?'

They started walking again, setting out across the exercise gardens that bordered the cell precinct.

'While I was undercover.'

'Investigating corruption at 'Space Main?'

Sita hesitated. He wasn't supposed to know that. Had he worked it out for himself or had he been told? Maybe he had been sent in as part of the frame. But what would be the

point. They could hardly expect her to incriminate herself, especially as she was innocent of all the official charges. Maybe they were looking for charges that *would* stick: breach of security for instance. 'While I was undercover,' she repeated.

Driftkiller spotted a surveillance stalk in one of the ornamental flower bushes, hawked copiously and spat in front of it. 'As I said, very scuffling probable.'

'Must you do that?' Sita asked with obvious distaste.

'P'raps the administrator doing the monitoring is an officer-class girlie too,' he said and laughed loudly. 'I'll take a crap on the next one, make her really earn her money.'

Sita had been surprised by Ronick's unscheduled visit to the police lock-up. Apparently he had bulled his way in using his naturally intimidating presence and his detective credentials. She still had no real idea why, and she was getting tired of waiting for him to get to the point. She certainly wasn't looking for sympathy or moral support, if that's what this was about, and if she had been, Driftblubber Ronick was the last person she would go to.

'What are you doing here, Driftkiller?' she asked ungraciously. 'What do you want from me?'

His chubby face clenched itself into a smile that once again hid his eyes almost completely. 'I came to help.'

'As you said, very scuffling probable.'

He stopped smiling and his eyes came back out. They showed his irritation. 'Listen, girlie, you made me look untrustworthy. I can't afford to look untrustworthy, it's bad for business.'

'I did? When was this?'

'You ask questions, I get answers. We have a meet, you get lifted.'

'Not immediately.'

'Close enough. You're not taking me down with you.'

'Don't flatter yourself. You've got no place in this. This frame took organising and some serious power. I doubt whether you've got the first idea what's involved here.'

'You still don't get it do you?' There was contempt in the eyes now. 'I don't give a curly crap what's involved here. You officer-class types can scuffle each other over or scuff yourselves I don't care. What I care about is my good name.'

'Driftkiller is a good name?' Sita said wryly.

'As it happens it is,' he said. 'And where it matters it is. And if you'd ever had to make your own way in the world, girlie, you'd know without having to be told that when challenge comes to fight it's all you've got. And it's all you're ever going to have.'

'And who'd have thought it,' Sita mocked. 'I had you down as a fat, sexist pig and here you are going all philosophical and noble on me.'

'Don't you worry your pretty little head about that,' he said. 'We all make mistakes don't we? Big mistakes. Some bigger than others. Some even big enough to get us...' He wagged his thick wrists at her.

Sita said, 'Yeah, yeah, and somebody's made a big fat fatal one right there. Trust me, when I get out of here, whoever they are, they're going to pay for their mistake. One painful way or another they *will* pay for it.'

'Fact remains when you're heading for the skullcap,' he said as though he had not been listening to her at all, 'there is no chance that I can have people saying it was me fingered you. Unemployment and death: not on my schedule just yet.'

The skullcap? The skullcap? For a second the thought inflated like a sudden bubble that was too big for her mind to contain. The skullcap. She had known it was a possibility, a theoretical possibility, technically a possibility. But not a possible possibility. *Never a possible possibility*. The skullcap. Until that moment she thought she had come to terms with the worst that could happen and was ready to tough it out. 'I know my career's finished,' she said, frowning. 'There's a chance I might even do some hard time. We both know competent interrogation controllers can make anyone look guilty of something and nothing. But they can't make you

look guilty enough for that. Not if you didn't do it, and I didn't do it. In the names of all the gods I didn't do it.'

For the first time since she had known him Sergeant Lars Driftkiller Ronick showed what looked to Sita like a genuinely spontaneous human emotion: it was pity. 'You really believe that don't you,' he said. 'Scuff me, where have you been living, girlie?'

'Stop calling me girlie!' Sita snapped.

'Major Benovides,' he said, 'you are dead meat unless you run.'

Sita fancied she felt the restraints tightening up again. She looked around for the boundary indicators: getting too close would also trigger the bands. 'It's been tried,' she said. 'Running becomes a problem when your hands and feet are chopped off.' The prison border limits looked to be a reasonable distance away across a wide expanse of elegantly close-cropped lawn but she turned back anyway. Could that be why he was here: to get her to commit suicide? Killed while trying to escape: she wouldn't be the first prisoner to have died that way...

Ronick stood for a moment staring out beyond the tranquil grounds of the lock-up to the traffic-filled motorway that ran close by. 'Smug arrogant bastards,' she heard him say loudly but seemingly to no one in particular. When he caught up with her again he said, too loudly for comfort, 'I could have wheels waiting for you on the shoulder of that motorway. You could be away before these scuffwits finish scratching their arses and fiddling with their zone focus.'

'Thirty seconds after I cross that boundary,' Sita muttered, 'I have no hands and feet. I'd bleed to death before I dragged myself within screaming distance of whoever was waiting.'

With ponderous irony Ronick said, 'Well scuffle my old boots - I hadn't thought of that,' then added flatly, 'And it would be me.'

'What would be you?'

'Waiting.'

Sita stopped walking and turned abruptly to confront him. 'Is that what they want me to do?' she demanded, too tired to

try to be subtle any longer. 'Is that why you're here? They want me to kill myself, is that it?'

Ronick shook his head sadly. 'You've been undercover too long, Benovides,' he said. 'You don't recognise a helping hand when it's offered.'

'Shouldn't be hard to spot,' she said. 'It'll be the one that's still attached: unlike mine.'

Ronick almost laughed; almost, but not quite. It was a snort more than a laugh. 'Beaten before you start.' His smile was open-eyed and mirthless. 'Girlie is as girlie does, girlie,' he said, stepping around her and starting to shamble slowly on towards the cell block.

There was the briefest of pauses before the last 'girlie' had made the insult so infuriating that Sita's anger flashed over to cold control. She followed him. 'It's impossible to get away from these places,' she said matter-of-factly. 'It's a mistake to confuse girlie with stupid. You can tell your superiors that from me if you like.'

'I have no superiors,' Ronick said. 'None that I know of.'

'You've been promoted, Sergeant?' Sita asked, allowing all the cold haughtiness of her rank and background into her voice. 'Or do you think I'm really that stupid?'

'I didn't say there weren't people in authority over me,' he said. 'Now do you want to get out of here or not, Major?'

Sita was slightly taken aback. Driftkiller was full of surprises today. 'It's impossible,' she repeated rather lamely, 'to get away from these places.'

'It's a police lock-up,' he said witheringly. 'You need to know the right policeman is all.'

'That would be you I assume?'

He snorted. 'No I can't get you out. But I know a man who can. For a price.'

'How big a price?'

He smiled and his eyes disappeared into the folds of fat. 'If you need to ask you can't afford it. But I've looked into your circumstances and I don't think you need to ask, do you?'

Was that what this was? Sita wondered. Was it just a scam to get money from her. 'You've been investigating my background?' she asked coldly.

He ignored the question. 'Tell me about your arrest,' he said. 'Everything you know about it.'

'Why?'

'Professional interest,' he suggested.

Sita was getting angry again. 'Don't push me, Sergeant.'

Ronick stopped walking and turned to look back out towards the motorway. 'It's no big trick to get you out of here,' he said. 'Keeping you out is another question. A whole bunch of other questions as it happens.'

Chapter Twelve

The Doctor had exhausted all the avenues of enquiry available to him from the office. He was uncomfortably aware that if he made too much of Leela's absence he could put her at greater risk than she might already be in. There was, however, a limit to the number of ways you could ask about the disappearance of someone without actually saying that they had disappeared. There was also a limit to the effectiveness of the questions you could ask using any communications device, no matter how sophisticated it might be, rather than doing the questioning face to face. As a famous detective once remarked: you can't tell they're sweating if you can't smell they're sweating - which the Doctor thought of as a rather unappealing way of saying it's mostly better to look people in the eye when you ask them questions. This might be something of a problem, the Doctor thought, for the overweight detective who had introduced himself as Sergeant Ronick and had sat himself down in one of the visitors' chairs, since almost any change of expression on the man's face seemed to hide his eyes within ample folds of flesh.

Ronick had barged in as the Doctor was on his way out to begin a systematic search for Leela based on his best guesses about the route she might have taken to the places she might have gone. 'I'm grateful to you for agreeing to see me,' he had said, unaware or unconcerned that the Doctor had done no such thing. 'Just a few questions, I shan't keep you long.' He had then sat smiling, silently staring at the Doctor through narrow fleshy slits. The Doctor smiled back but remained standing where he was by the door. He waited without speaking, knowing the detective was using the same technique on him that he himself had used on his duellists.

The smiling silence stretched out until finally Ronick said, 'It's a bad time I can come back?'

'Is there ever a good time to be questioned by a policeman?' the Doctor said, still smiling, and strolled back and sat down in a chair beside Ronick. 'Fire away.'

'Interesting choice of words,' Ronick said. 'I'm investigating a shooting.'

The Doctor's first thought was Leela. Was she involved? Had she been shot? But he dismissed that possibility immediately; he would have heard about it already. 'An illegal shooting presumably.'

Ronick nodded. 'Criminal court jurisdiction,' he said. 'It was murder, no question about that.'

The Doctor still found himself slightly surprised by the contradictory attitudes to killing in this world. As far as he could work out the only real difference between legal and illegal killing appeared to be the consent of the people involved. If everyone agreed then it was a duel and the Rules of Attack applied; if someone didn't agree then it was murder and the police dealt with it. There was a certain logic about the whole arrangement, a sick, destructive logic but a logic nonetheless, and it worried him a little that he could recognise that to be the case. 'So how can I help you?'

Ronick said, 'The victim's name was Nenron.' He paused possibly waiting for a reaction, the Doctor thought, and when he got none he went on, 'He drove runners for a living. At least that was what it said on his ID. In fact he was a minor criminal into anything that would turn a dishonest dollar. He was involved in the corruption a colleague of mine was investigating at Aerospace Main. Cargo-skimming, haulers of all kinds: cash, pharmaceuticals, biologicals; illegal off-world travel transfers. Usual stuff.'

'Sounds like a thoroughly lawless sort of place,' the Doctor said.

'Not especially,' Ronick said. 'No more than you'd expect from a main interplanetary terminus.' He shrugged with the professional's dismissive cynicism. 'You name it though and

‘Space Main’s probably got it. Except a criminal mastermind, which is what my colleague was supposed to be looking for.’

‘This man Nenron wasn’t a criminal mastermind then?’

Ronick laughed mirthlessly. ‘He was a small-time player, big time enough to get himself dead it seems, but strictly small time.’

The Doctor resisted the impulse to volunteer information. ‘You still haven’t said why you’ve come to see me?’

Ronick’s eyes narrowed and more or less vanished. ‘Nenron was last seen in the company of your principal fighter. What’s her name: Leela is it?’

‘Ah,’ the Doctor said, and thought: how did he know that? ‘If it’s Leela you want to talk to I’m afraid you *will* have to come back. She isn’t here at the moment and there’s no way I can contact her.’

‘Because you have no idea where she is, I know,’ Ronick said. ‘It appears she has disappeared, yes?’

Playing for time by being even more deliberately obtuse, the Doctor asked, ‘Are you suggesting there’s a connection of some kind?’

‘I’m suggesting there’s a number of connections of all kinds. My colleague saw you coming out of the State Security Minister’s office as she was going in to be arrested, for example.’

Surprised the Doctor said, ‘Your colleague is Sita Benovides? I didn’t know she was a policeman.’

‘She isn’t. She’s a major in state security.’

‘Arrested for...?’

Ronick ignored the question. ‘Now this is all circumstantial, you could even say it’s coincidental. But my feeling is coincidences only happen when someone makes them happen. And my question is, could that someone be you?’

‘No,’ the Doctor said emphatically, ‘it couldn’t.’

‘You would say that wouldn’t you,’ Ronick said cheerfully.

‘Yes I would,’ the Doctor agreed equally cheerfully. ‘Why don’t you believe in coincidences?’

‘I don’t believe in a lot of things,’ Ronick said. ‘I don’t believe in my colleague’s chances of getting out of this frame-

up in one piece. Which would be a waste because I think one piece is a good look for her. I also don't believe you're telling me the truth.'

'You're quite right,' the Doctor said. 'There is no such thing as coincidence. It's the law of probability and pattern recognition, nothing more. And I never lie. Not deliberately anyway.'

Ronick's eyes narrowed again. 'I don't even believe you're who you say you are.'

'Have I said who I am?' the Doctor asked, wondering if Ronick did that thing with his eyes deliberately.

'This so-called school is a front. You're not a genuine agent. Leela's not a genuine duellist.'

The Doctor strove to look outraged. 'How can you say that to me?' he demanded and produced his shiny new ID from the pocket of his coat. 'I have this proof of identity.' He offered it to Ronick with a triumphant flourish.

Ronick did not bother looking at it. 'ID. It doesn't stand for idiot detective you know. I can get you a dozen of those things. Gods in a runner, a small-timer like Nenron could have got you a dozen of them. Not as good as I could get you, but they'd pass.'

'I can assure you,' the Doctor said in his most affronted manner, and once again not technically telling a lie, 'that this is a genuine ID issued by the State Security Ministry.' He leaned closer to Ronick and smiled his most vivid and wolfish smile. 'But I do appreciate the offer.'

'All part of the service,' Ronick said, not smiling.

The Doctor said, 'As a matter of interest, that police ID you flashed when you forced your way in here; how do I know that's genuine?'

'You don't,' Ronick said. 'But then what are you going to do: call a policeman?'

'It's a possibility,' the Doctor said. 'Can you recommend one?'

Ronick shook his head. 'We're mostly crooks, or stupid, or both.'

'Which are you?'

‘That’s for you to decide.’

Despite some misgivings, the Doctor found he was beginning to warm to this fat detective. ‘Perhaps we could help each other,’ he suggested.

‘What did you have in mind exactly?’

The truth was the Doctor didn’t have anything in mind exactly. He was pretty much playing for time while he tried to decide whether to confide in the man. ‘You are investigating the murder of Nenron because you want to help Sita Benovides,’ he said.

‘I’m investigating the murder of Nenron because, like it says on my ID, I’m a law officer.’

Ronick’s eyes were wide open now and the Doctor was surprised to see how warm and kindly they seemed. Who was it that said the eyes were the windows on the soul? He couldn’t remember but they were so spectacularly wrong it was probably better that they were forgotten. ‘You mean this is actually an official investigation?’

The detective still did not smile. He shrugged slightly, it was a surprisingly subtle gesture for such a large man. ‘I’m actually an official,’ he said. ‘Question is what are you actually?’

Should he tell him, the Doctor wondered. He let the silence stretch tight while he decided and then he broke it abruptly. ‘You’re right. I’m not from here. In fact I’m not from this planet at all. Neither, as it happens, is Leela. She’s from a different planet too.’

Ronick heaved himself up out of the chair. ‘I knew it,’ he declared. ‘I scuffling well knew it. I knew you were fakes as soon as I laid eyes on you.’

‘I wouldn’t exactly say we were fakes,’ the Doctor said. ‘We’re just not what everyone assumed we were.’

Ronick said, ‘You’re state security aren’t you.’ It was a statement of obvious fact rather than any sort of question.

‘State security?’ The Doctor was so genuinely taken aback he almost laughed out loud. ‘Whatever gave you that idea?’

‘Those bastards never have just one agent operating. Benovides is so up her own arse it never occurred to her that

there was someone else in play.’ Ronick shook his head. ‘I didn’t bother suggesting it to her, she wouldn’t have believed me.’ He sniffed, a small derisive sound. ‘So in fact there are two others in play. Gods in a runner, they really must have trusted her, mustn’t they. Or maybe it was you they didn’t trust?’

‘If that’s what you think,’ the Doctor said, falling back on his standard response to the unanswerable.

‘You people,’ Ronick snorted. ‘You spend most of your time watching each other, as far as I can see, and you still think you’re slicker than driftslime on a skin-scraper don’t you?’

The Doctor said, ‘Do we?’ falling back on his standard response to the unintelligible.

‘You think the rest of us don’t know how you work. You think ordinary cops like me can’t spot you because you’re off-worlders brought in and given an elaborate cover story. A really elaborate cover story in your case.’

‘If I told you that I had nothing to do with state security at all; that the truth is much less believable: would you believe me?’

‘No,’ Ronick said flatly. ‘And don’t try my patience. I’m not a patient man and I can blow your cover.’ He snapped his fingers. ‘Like that.’

‘I don’t imagine you’d want to get on the wrong side of state security,’ the Doctor said and smiled. ‘My feeling is they are probably not the best possible enemies to have?’

‘Is that a threat?’ Ronick asked threateningly.

From the aggressive response, the Doctor could see that Ronick was nervous of state security just like everyone else seemed to be. Not even tough, cynical policemen were immune apparently. ‘If I suggested that we work together, confidentially, off the record or whatever you want to call it, what would you say?’

Ronick frowned. ‘Are you asking for my help?’

‘Yes,’ the Doctor said. He stood up and offered Ronick his hand. The gesture clearly puzzled the detective. ‘On some of the more civilised planets they signify agreement by clasping hands,’ he explained.

Ronick hesitated. 'What do I get in return for helping you?'

'Whatever it was you came here looking for,' the Doctor said, 'I'll do my best to provide it.'

'What do you think that is?'

'I think you came here looking for the help of a senior agent in state security,' the Doctor said. 'But you'll have to make do with me. Do we have an agreement?'

Ronick said, 'Why not?' And as he took the Doctor's hand his eyes were hidden behind his smile.

Finbar had estimated that it would take about eighty hours for the old freighter to rendezvous with the Lady Hakai's space-yacht, the *Ultraviolet Explorer*. He had stashed enough food concentrates and water in the medical supply locker to sustain Keefer during the time, but he could not provide much in the way of waste elimination facilities. In fact he could not provide anything except the rather unsanitary advice of the seasoned space-hand. He had suggested using any or all of the bulk cargo silos. 'But don't use the same one for liquids and solids,' he had said. 'That way lies squelching and discomfiting stinkiness.' Keefer considered it briefly and chose instead to limit himself to the minimum inputs required to keep his body in some sort of balance.

He had relaxed completely, lowering his metabolic rate so that he was on the edge of sleep, drifting in and out of a semi-dream state, unconscious of the passage of time but continuously aware of the sounds and smells around him.

During the journey nobody had come to where he drifted and it was only when the freighter's directional thrusters cut in, sending soft murmuring vibrations through the air of the deck space, that he had finally woken.

He found he was unexpectedly hungry, and a lot thirstier than he should have been. He checked the time elapsed. For whatever reason it had taken a hundred and thirty-six hours to find the huge space-yacht and begin the approach and docking manoeuvres. Even allowing for the full error margin, a flight overrun of fifty-six hours was unlikely. Either Finbar

had got it wrong or the *Ultraviolet Explorer* had changed its routine.

While he listened to the delicate bursts of power, Keefer slaked his thirst slowly and ate some of the concentrates. He had to bring himself back to full function very carefully, he could not afford any physical imbalances. He needed to be sharp if he was going to get to and confront the Lady Hakai. If she was the one, the unexplained enemy who had sent the android against him, then he needed to be machine sharp.

As he ate and drank he considered the possibilities for boarding the *Ultraviolet Explorer*. They seemed to be limited to two: he could identify himself, throw down a challenge and fight his way on; or he could get himself off-loaded with the cargo. A frontal attack meant he didn't get a look at the Fat Boys before he took them on, which would be a mistake. An avoidable mistake if he went the cargo route. But if the breather ran out, or if the silo pressure tubes had purification filters, even basic crud screens, riding with the bulk lecea as it was sucked through into the space-yacht's storage would be a worse mistake. That would be a final mistake from which you learned nothing except that you'd made a mistake and it was final.

He waited for the food and water to take their full effect so that his mind was as clear as possible, before he finally decided to risk the lecea.

It was not until she woke up that Leela realised she had been asleep. The last thing she remembered was being carried between two men who had been talking about what they would do with her if their plans went wrong. She remembered concentrating on listening for information. She remembered concentrating. Then there was nothing. She did not remember concentrating on nothing. She did not remember falling into the darkness.

Now here she was, still in the darkness but she was awake. She knew she was awake because... she knew she was awake. She knew she was no longer asleep. She could see

nothing, hear nothing, feel nothing and yet she knew she was not dreaming. She *knew* she could see nothing, hear nothing and feel nothing and she knew that must mean that she was awake.

She reached out into the darkness. Her hand brushed against something soft and she grabbed for it but it evaded her grasp and was gone. She felt giddy for a moment and was almost sick. What was the creature she had just touched? Was it something so poisonous that touching its skin could make her ill? She felt giddy and sick again, and she put a hand to her face and wiped away the slick film of sweat that had broken out on her forehead. That was when she realised the mask and breathing filters had gone. Exploring further she found that the coverall had been removed. Something touched her shoulder. Instinctively she felt for her knife. It was not there. Her combat pouch was missing too. Something touched the top of her head and as she tried to jerk away from it a spinning wave of dizziness swept over her and filled her throat with vomit. She choked it back, swallowing hard and gritting her teeth. She would not be sick. She was starting to be sorry that she had woken up. Think, she thought. I must think.

Questions you must ask yourself when you are captured, she heard her warrior trainer say: Am I wounded? Where am I being held? How can I escape? As far as she could remember he never said anything about asking yourself what sort of poisonous horror was hiding in the dark and how you ended up being thrown to it. No mention of being thrown to anything. Apart from the horda. Panic flickered at the back of her mind. Had she been taken back and thrown to the horda? Panic flickered harder, fluttered harder at the back of her mind. Had she never left? Panic shook and shocked her. Was this the pit of the horda? Was that where she had always been, had all the rest been just a dream? A nightmare. Was this the nightmare that was death? Panic took her breath away and plunged her towards a darker darkness.

Think. She must *think*. That was what the Doctor told her. You must think, because without thought there was only fear and chaos. Thought, she heard him say, might not stop you being afraid but at least you understood the reasons for your fear. Think. Question. First question. Why was it so dark? Why could she see nothing? Was she blind? She put her hands up close to her eyes. Nothing. She closed her eyes and opened them. No change in the blackness. She rubbed her eyes. There were the briefest of small flashing specks of red and yellow against the blackness. It meant nothing, she knew. It told her nothing. So either she was blind or she was being held in total darkness. She felt a little better. She was beginning to get control of herself. Second question. Why could she hear nothing? She listened. She could hear herself breathing and when she swallowed the faint sound of it crackled in her ears. So she was not deaf. She felt better. It was shaming to have panicked. Warriors did not panic. Thinkers did not panic.

Third question. Why could she feel nothing? She extended her arms and swept them carefully around her. There was nothing within reach. The thing that had touched her, that she had touched, did not seem to be hunting her. If it was, then it was a poor hunter and she could probably outwit it. Her confidence was back now. She could cope now. Strangely, though, she was feeling giddy again. She squatted down onto her haunches and put her hands flat on the ground. But there was no ground. She put both hands on top of her feet and then with one hand felt round and then under her feet. There was no ground. She must still be asleep. There was no ground under her feet. She felt the panic spasm paralyse her breathing. *There was no ground under her feet*. Think. A warrior did not panic; a thinker did not panic; she was Leela of the Sevateem and she did not panic. She sucked in a deep shuddering breath. Think. If there was no ground under her feet then she must be hanging above the ground. She felt around herself and above herself but she could not find the means by which she was suspended. And again she was giddy and feeling sick. Could she be felling? No

that was not possible. She could not have been falling for all the time she had been awake. She had no idea how long she had been asleep, but however long it was she could not have been falling for all that time as well. She must still be asleep. 'This is not happening,' she said aloud. 'I must wake up.'

'Good, you're awake finally,' a voice said somewhere close by, and light filled her eyes and blinded her for a moment. 'Thought they might have overdone the dosage after all. What a scuffling nuisance that would have been.'

Leela's eyes adjusted quickly and she found she was in a small room with curves where you might expect the edges to be. The walls, floor and the inside of the roof were all covered with the same smooth, grey cloth. At least it looked to her like cloth, and it looked like there were walls, floor and roof. It was hard to tell for sure though because she could not reach the cloth to feel it and she could not be certain which was the floor and which was the roof because she was floating helplessly in the air. Her eyes and her sense of balance were both suddenly unreliable. She could not be sure which way was up and which way was down. It was like being submerged in totally clear water without knowing where the surface was. She struggled to get control of her movement and direction in the same way she would if she was swimming, by pulling with her arms and kicking with her legs, but all that happened she found was that she made jerky swimming movements and stayed in the same place. She felt giddy again and slightly sick.

'From your reaction I gather weightlessness is not something you're used to,' the voice said. There was amusement in its tone. 'The first thing you need to do is relax, stop fighting it. Trust me that's one fight even you can't win.'

Leela recognised this as another of those... what did the Doctor say they were? Proximity speakers, yes that was it, they were called proximity speakers. She knew them to be a way for cowards to give orders without needing to show their faces. The owner of this voice was in a control room

somewhere. When she found him she would teach him that a coward could never hide. Her anger stopped her feeling sick.

‘Just so you know,’ the voice went on, ‘this is a stripped-down speeder yacht and we’re on a flat-out, one-way burn-it-down. Bad news is the living conditions are pretty basic. No, let’s be honest, the living conditions are total crud. Mine are anyway. Good news is it won’t be for that long, comparatively speaking it won’t be for that long, and there’ll be a useful touch of pseudo-grav for practically half the flight. It’s not a full-scale drive-integrated generator or anything fancy like that but it should help a bit. The engines will kick in again soon, at which time you can sort yourself out, explore your quarters, that sort of thing. You’ll find the ablutions compartment at one end and the feeding station at the other. Sort of appropriate really when you think about it.’

Leela had stopped struggling and was listening and waiting. This man, she realised, liked to talk. That was good. Most of what he was saying meant little or nothing to her, she did not know what pseudo-grav was, for instance, and why it was useful, but it was clear that things were about to change in some way. Change was good because it could offer a captive chances for escape. She reached a hand out but she was no closer to the wall. Weightlessness? How did they do this? Why did they do this? In many ways, if you could concentrate on not being sick, it was a pleasant feeling. They did not do it to amuse her though, of that much she was certain. It was probably just a way of keeping prisoners helpless.

‘Any questions?’ the voice said.

She had many questions, but asking them of her guard showed her ignorance and ignorance was weakness and weakness was something she should not let him see. ‘Why have I been taken captive?’ she asked.

‘Any questions you think I might answer?’ the voice mocked.

‘Where are you taking me?’

‘You’re not listening,’ the voice said, sounding bored. ‘I say again: any questions you think I might answer?’

Leela craned her neck round, trying to see the device he was using to spy on her. 'Where are you? Show yourself.'

'I'm on the flight deck,' the voice said, 'and that's where I'm going to stay. I have no intention of giving you the chance to cut my heart out or whatever it is you have in mind.'

'It is as I thought,' Leela said contemptuously. 'You are a peering spy and a sneaking coward.'

'You say that as though it was a bad thing.' The voice was amused again.

He was talking too much for a trained guard, Leela thought, and as long as she could keep him talking he might still give away something useful. She tried a different approach. 'How many of you are there? Are the two who ambushed me with you?'

'They were unavoidably detained.'

There was something in the way the voice said it that made Leela think her kidnappers had been outmanoeuvred while she was asleep. They might even have been killed. 'Did you kill them?' she asked.

'Of course I didn't kill them. I'm a pilot. I leave killing to the professionals like you.'

Leela registered that she was talking to the pilot, and ignoring his insult persisted, 'But they are dead.'

'Not my concern,' the voice said, sounding concerned.

Leela recognised the concern and attacked the weakness it suggested. 'If they are dead and you did not kill them,' she said, 'how safe will you be?'

'I'm safe enough for the moment,' the pilot said. 'Especially if you stay where you are and I stay where I am.'

It sounded to Leela as though there might be no one else in this stripped-down speeder yacht, whatever that turned out to be, but her and this man who was the pilot. 'How many other guards are there?' she asked.

'You don't expect me to answer that.'

'It does not matter,' she said, smiling as sneeringly as she could manage. 'I know the answer already.'

'Are you sure?' the pilot said, sounding slightly unsure.

'Are you sure you are able to do the job alone?' Leela asked.

‘Between you and the rest of the ship there are two sealed bulkheads and two emergency airlocks, which are all controlled from the flight deck. If it wasn’t for the actual flying I wouldn’t be needed at all.’

‘Just as the two who ambushed me were not needed,’ Leela remarked.

There was the briefest of pauses then the pilot said, ‘They lived greedy, they died stupid. Not my problem.’

‘You are not greedy and stupid?’ Leela suggested, without emphasis.

‘Well I’m not stupid,’ the pilot said.

Leela noticed she was drifting very, very slowly towards the wall, or the floor or the roof, and was now almost within touching distance of it. She stretched out her arm and extended a finger and touched the grey cloth. It was foam padding, which felt soft and smooth, but when she pushed at it with her fingertip she found herself propelled away, drifting not quickly but more quickly than before. ‘So you will not die,’ she said, as she drifted down or up towards another surface. This must have been what had happened in the darkness she realised when she thought that a moving creature had poisoned her with its touch or that she had been thrown into the horda pit. She had been bouncing around like this and being made giddy and sick by the strange movement. That was the thing about darkness. It tricked your senses with all the things you feared most. She had not understood until this moment how much she feared the horda, how much she feared dying.

‘Sooner or later everybody dies,’ the pilot said. ‘Trick is to make it later rather than sooner.’

Leela was floating closer to the wall, but this time she was careful not to reach out and push haphazardly but rather to wait until she was close enough to it to use the surface in a more controlled way. She tucked her knees up against her chest and put her arms round her legs and in this position let herself bump gently against the soft foam. She stayed folded in a ball waiting for the best angle and when she felt herself beginning to drift away from the surface again she

straightened her body, held her arms out in front of her, and kicked off with her legs. She flew the length of the cabin faster than she had expected but then she found it easy to slow herself by putting her hands flat against the surface she was approaching and letting her arms relax. She was not fully under control but she was no longer completely helpless. With practice she felt she could master this weightlessness. She would practise, she decided. She pushed herself off again. Practising would not be difficult. This was fun.

‘I’m sorry to spoil your fun,’ the pilot said over the proximity speakers, ‘but before you get too carried away, we’re coming up on the first navigation vector point.’

‘What does that mean?’ Leela asked. Showing ignorance of technical detail was not a dangerous sign of Weakness, she decided. It could work the opposite way in fact because it would flatter the pilot, which might put him at his ease and make him careless.

‘It means the main drive will be kicking in for... let’s see now... thirty hours or so. Then there’ll be twenty hours weightless... after which it’ll be full main drive for the rest of the trip. Assuming they make it to the rendezvous coordinates at the agreed time and I don’t have to make a whole bunch of adjustments, I should be able to hand you over before we become so bored with each other’s company that death seems like an entertaining alternative.’

‘I have nothing by which to measure the passing of time,’ Leela said.

‘Sorry about that,’ the pilot said, sounding smugly amused again. ‘You’ll just have to take my word for it, won’t you.’

Leela asked, ‘You will warn me when these things are about to happen?’

‘I will indeed,’ he said, and immediately intoned: ‘Main engine burn begins in five; four; three; two; one. Burn is initiated, we have white lights on all boards, acceleration is steady and rising.’

Leela heard the engine's vibration softly murmuring in the air and felt the smallest beginnings of a directional change in her, now not quite weightless, glide.

Chapter Thirteen

As far as he could remember, the Doctor had never been the getaway driver in an actual, genuine jailbreak before and he was finding it rather exhilarating. He sat in the driver's seat of the illegal, unregistered runner that Sergeant Ronick had provided and watched the fat policeman strolling with Sita Benovides in the grounds of the police lock-up. At some point the two of them were going to make a run for the motorway, on the hard shoulder of which the runner was parked. The computer was programmed, the runner's drive was ticking over and the Doctor was ready to do his part. Of course getaway driver was a relative term, he thought ruefully. All he actually had to do was to operate the passenger doors and then release the brakes so that the runner would move off and slot smoothly and unremarked into the constant stream of motorway traffic. It was not strictly necessary for him to be here at all, he realised, except that Ronick had clearly wanted him involved. The Doctor was not sure whether this was because he saw it as a test of their new partnership, or because he thought that a senior undercover officer in state security would have useful contacts and influence if things went badly wrong. It was probably a bit of both. Ronick struck him as a man who was dishonest enough to feel the need for as much insurance as he could reasonably devise.

The elaborately casual stroll was bringing the ill-matched pair gradually closer to the perimeter markers of the lock-up security zone. The Doctor was surprised that, as far as he could see, Sita was still wearing her wrist and ankle bands. It was a detail that Ronick had been reluctant to talk about when they discussed the plan for the break-out. 'I've got that covered,' was all he would say about it, and the Doctor had thought it best not to press him, now he was not so sure. They must make a run for it soon, he thought, or they would

draw attention to themselves simply by walking too close to the boundary.

He rechecked the settings on the runner's computer and rested his hand on the door control switch. On the couple dawdled across the close-cropped grass. He wondered if something had gone wrong with the plan. Perhaps Ronick's friend had let him down. Maybe the runner had been spotted and they were trying to warn him off. Should he reset the computer to move the runner and take it round the block and bring it back? Problem was he had no idea how big the block might be and how long it would take to go round it, and, anyway, resetting the computer was time-consuming in itself. What would an undercover senior officer in state security do in these circumstances, he thought?

And now Ronick and Sita had stopped walking altogether and were standing looking back at the lock-up buildings. What could they be expecting? Was it a trap? Slowly they turned and looked for the first time in the direction of the runner, and then abruptly they were across the perimeter and sprinting towards him. He resisted a sudden urge to open the doors immediately. The plan was that nothing should be more obvious than was necessary and a parked runner with its doors standing open was more noticeable than one with its doors closed. So he waited and waited until they had almost reached him, and waited, and then he opened the doors and closed them again behind the fugitives in one smooth almost uninterrupted movement. At the same time he released the brake, and the runner jerked into life and rolled forward and on into the motorway traffic.

The Doctor turned round in his seat to look at his passengers. Ronick was the less out of breath of the two. It was probably fear that was making Sita breathless he realised. 'Was there a problem?' he asked.

'Ask the major,' Ronick grunted, pulling a toolbox from under the seat.

'Was there a problem?'

Sita brandished her wrist bands. 'I paid for these things to be deactivated.'

‘And they have been,’ Ronick said. ‘Are you bleeding yet?’ He opened the toolbox and took out a small rotary cutter.

‘Could happen any time,’ she said. ‘All it’ll take is the flick of a switch.’

‘We’ve got an hour,’ he said. ‘At least we did have until you started scuffling about.’

She said through gritted teeth, ‘I could feel them tightening up.’

‘No you couldn’t.’ He started the cutter and began working on one of the wrist bands. ‘You just thought you could.’

The Doctor checked the timer on the runner’s computer control panel. ‘It can be the same thing,’ he said.

‘Don’t patronise me, Doctor,’ she snapped. ‘He might think you’re state security but you don’t fool me.’

Ronick pressed the cutter harder into the band. ‘I told her what you were and that I’d brought you along as a guarantee of good faith. Didn’t seem to work.’

‘What do *you* think I am?’ the Doctor asked cheerfully.

The cutter’s high-pitched whine deepened slightly as it bit. ‘One more variant of the same old crooks and con men,’ Sita said, concentrating hard and staring into the Doctor’s face, ‘who latched onto the noble contest and turned it into a money-making circus.’ She flinched and grimaced as the cutter touched the skin of her wrist and drew blood.

‘Sorry,’ Ronick muttered.

‘Just get on with it,’ she urged.

‘You think I’m an agent,’ the Doctor said, trying to distract her again.

‘Yes, that’s what I think.’ She glanced at her wrist. ‘This is taking too long,’ she said to Ronick. ‘There isn’t going to be enough time.’

‘You want guarantees?’ he muttered. ‘There are no guarantees.’

‘I want my hands and feet,’ she snapped. ‘I paid for my hands and feet.’

Ronick worked on grimly. ‘There’s a theory,’ he said eventually without looking up from what he was doing, ‘that

if you put enough distance between you and the base unit the bands are inactive.'

'A theory?' she said angrily. 'A theory? I never should have listened to you.'

'It's a possibility,' he said.

'A possibility.' She laughed without any sign of being amused. 'What, that was the plan all along? You're going to test some half-baked theory using my wrists and ankles as experimental subjects?'

'Well not this one anyway,' Ronick said triumphantly, as with a final angry buzz the cutter severed the band. 'Other wrist,' he ordered without pausing.

The Doctor checked the timer. Unfortunately it looked as though Sita was right: there would not be enough time to do all four bands. And it seemed unlikely that the distance theory was anything more than wishful thinking. 'Is there another cutter?' he asked.

'No,' Ronick said, peering closely at what he was doing.

'Why not?' Sita demanded.

'I didn't think of it,' Ronick said. 'It was an oversight all right? I'm sorry.'

'You're sorry,' Sita said angrily. 'You're sorry?' She looked at the Doctor. 'What's your excuse?'

'I haven't got one, I'm afraid,' the Doctor said. It sounded to him that to add to their difficulties the cutter Ronick was using was beginning to lose its edge and was starting to labour.

Sita must have noticed the change in note too because she said, 'You brought extra blades at least?'

'Takes time to change them,' Ronick muttered.

'You really planned this meticulously didn't you?'

'I got you out didn't I?'

'Tourniquets?' she asked flatly and when he did not answer she said it again in exactly the same tone only louder. 'Tourniquets?'

'Yes!' Ronick said angrily. 'I brought tourniquets just in case.'

‘That part of the plan is working anyway,’ she said bitterly. ‘You brought four I imagine? May as well look on the bright side I suppose at least you get to keep one of them for your next gullible amputee.’

‘And at least you get to keep your brain functioning,’ he said, moving the cutter backwards and forwards very slightly in an attempt to compensate for its declining effectiveness.

‘Judging by this fiasco,’ she snorted, ‘I’m not sure that functioning is how I’d describe what my brain has been doing.’

The Doctor had been considering the way the bands worked. Presumably they were triggered to contract by some sort of microwave pulse technology and at the moment their particular frequency was blocked at source or simply not being sent at all. A contract instruction would be sent on a delay, with perimeter markers and tamper-warning relays and the like set to cancel the delay and trigger immediate contraction. The contract instruction would be stopped by a faint, ultra-short range microwave pulse generated by the wall-mounted scanner plates. He knew very little about microwave technology but it seemed reasonable to him to suppose that one pulse must in some way be the reverse of the other.

Ronick’s cutter was making less and less headway with the second wrist band. ‘Come on, come on,’ he was muttering to himself. ‘Come on you scuffling piece of crap.’

Obviously with no signal, the Doctor thought, the bands remained inert and this allowed them to be tampered with without setting them off. He rummaged about in the pockets of his coat without success until finally he found the sonic screwdriver where it had fallen through a hole into the lining. He ripped the hem open and took it out. It had occurred to him that he might be able to use the screwdriver to feed enough controlled power into an inert band to reverse its polarity and this might trigger it to open. Briefly he wondered why the idea of reversing the polarity of something seemed so familiar to him. He was fairly sure he had never said. ‘Maybe I can reverse the polarity using the sonic screwdriver,’ but it

certainly felt as though he had. ‘Sita,’ he said, shaking off the feeling, ‘would you put your foot between the seats here so that I can look at your ankle band. I think I may be able to help.’

‘How exactly?’ she said. ‘Are you planning to chew it off?’

‘No. I have a...’ he waved the sonic screwdriver vaguely. There didn’t seem much point in trying to explain what it was and what he was going to do with it. For one thing he wasn’t sure that he could explain it and for another it struck him that he had no idea whether reversing the polarity would open the band or tighten it still further. ‘...a device,’ he finished rather lamely.

‘A device,’ she sneered. ‘That’s impressive. Why was I so worried? The agent saves the day’ She made no attempt to do as he suggested. ‘You might as well stop and change the blade,’ she said to Ronick, who was making very little progress with the cutter. Without speaking he stopped and began to dismantle the blade holder. ‘Where’s the medical kit?’ she asked.

‘Left-hand locker,’ he grunted.

‘What a lucky coincidence,’ she said, reaching for it. ‘That’s the side with the hand that stays attached.’ She opened the kit and took out three bands, not unlike the wrist and ankle bands except that these had manual adjusters, and laid them out on the seat beside her. ‘I assume you both know how to apply a tourniquet,’ she said. ‘Only my hands, sorry my *hand* will be a bit full, metaphorically speaking.’

‘Do stop moaning, woman,’ the Doctor said, feigning anger. ‘There’ll be plenty of time for that when you’re bleeding to death. You’re supposed to be a major in state security. Start acting like one. Now put your foot between the seats so that I can work on that band.’

Sita thrust her foot through the gap. ‘For the record I’m an ex-major in state security,’ she said.

The Doctor examined the band closely. The ones he had been fitted with had lines of tiny circular spots raised slightly, almost imperceptibly, higher than the rest of the

surface. He ran his finger over the band feeling for one of these.

‘If you’re looking for the off switch,’ she said. ‘There isn’t one.’

‘If there’s an on switch there must by definition be an off switch,’ the Doctor said. ‘They are the same thing after all. It’s simply a question of finding it.’

‘By all means let’s have a philosophical discussion about switches,’ Sita said witheringly. ‘This is the ideal time for it.’

The Doctor said absently, ‘Logic rather than philosophy I think, don’t you?’

‘Are you insane?’ Sita demanded. ‘Are you insane or are you simply trying to drive me insane?’

She tensed her leg and twitched her foot in anger and the Doctor lost his place on the ankle band. ‘Keep still,’ he said. ‘We’re running out of time here.’ As he said it he found one of the spots he was looking for and lightly pressed the head of the sonic screwdriver over it. ‘Try not to move now,’ he instructed and turned the sonic screwdriver on. Almost immediately the runner hit an uneven patch of road. He felt for the spot again. It was easier to find this time because it was hot to the touch now. Was that a good sign or a bad sign, he wondered. He put the sonic screwdriver back on the spot and reactivated it. If he had got this the wrong way round would there be time to reverse the reversal before there was irreparable damage to the tissue and bones of the ankle?

‘How much longer are you going to be with that blade?’ Sita said to Ronick.

‘Nearly there.’

‘Nearly out of time,’ she said quietly.

‘I scuffling know that,’ he muttered.

She sighed softly. ‘I don’t want to be an amputee,’ she almost whispered. ‘I really don’t want to be a multiple amputee. I can’t think of anything worse.’

Ronick said, ‘Not being able to think, that’s worse. Not much point in having all your fingers and toes if you don’t know what twenty means.’

The Doctor had been surprised to hear the fat detective say something like that, since it was more or less what he would have said himself. 'That's more or less what I would have said myself,' he said.

'I'll trade places with you,' Sita said. 'See how you both feel then.'

The Doctor heard in her voice that she was giving herself up to the calm numbness of terror. He knew from experience that the calm numbness of terror could give way to the thrashing hysteria of terror with only the briefest of ear-splitting screams by way of transition. The screaming he could put up with, indeed he had come to expect it from his travelling companions, at least before Leela, but thrashing about could jeopardise the success of what he was doing. The area of the band around the head of the sonic screwdriver was actually beginning to stretch and swell. It wasn't coming apart as he had hoped but it was bloating flaccidly and loosening around the ankle.

'Ready,' Ronick said and the cutter began to whine again.

'It's hopeless,' Sita said, but there was a small hope in her voice.

It's not a good time for a change of mood, the Doctor thought. When hope returned could thrashing hysteria be far behind? The place on the ankle band into which he had been feeding power from the sonic screwdriver was continuing to stretch, expanding out into folds on either side of itself. He stopped and eased the folds open, pulling the whole ankle band into a wider loop. It looked big enough, he thought. Quickly he took off her shoe and slipped the loop down over her foot and off. He dropped the band onto the seat beside him. 'Let me see your other foot,' he commanded.

Without comment Sita pulled her shoeless foot out from between the seats and pushed her other foot through the gap. It was a moment or two before she realised what had happened. 'You got it off.' There was disbelief in her voice. 'You got it off. How did you do that?'

On the seat beside the Doctor the discarded band was moving. It had started to contract. Time's up, he thought

without bothering to look at the runner's timer. 'Hold still,' he and Ronick both said, almost in unison.

'It's happening,' she said. 'I can feel it. They're tightening up.'

The bands were no longer inert and it was possible, the Doctor realised, that the anti-tamper circuits might be triggered by what he and Ronick were doing. They might be speeding things up, hastening the inevitable, actually making things worse: except that there was no way to make things worse. It was this or nothing. The area of the ankle band he was working on was expanding as before but this time as fast as the sonic screwdriver generated extra space the slack was taken up by the general contraction.

'It's beginning to hurt,' Sita gritted.

The Doctor wasn't sure whether she was talking about her ankle or her wrist or both.

'Nearly there,' Ronick said and the whine of the cutter deepened as he pressed harder and harder. 'I'll get it off you if I have to cut your hand off myself.'

'Joke,' she gasped, 'bad time... bad taste... no round of applause from me.'

'Everyone's a critic,' Ronick muttered. 'I thought it was worth a hand myself.'

For the moment all the Doctor could do was to keep up with the contraction round the ankle, neutralising its effect by continuously generating more unfolding band. There had to come a time he hoped when the expansion had weakened it so much that the band would tear itself apart; or the band would reach some sort of design limit and simply stop contracting; or preferably both.

'Done it, done it,' Ronick almost shouted. 'Gods there's a lot of blood. I must have nicked a vein or something.'

Sita was elated. 'It doesn't matter,' she exulted. 'Blood I can replace. Here get the binding seals from the medical kit. I owe you, Driftkiller.'

'Talk's cheap and getting cheaper all the time,' Ronick said. 'And it's Ronick, or Lars, or even Sergeant. Not Driftkiller all

right? Driftkilling was my old man's profession and as it happens he was a scuffling scuffwit. How's it coming Doctor?'

'Keep her still,' the Doctor warned. 'Keep your leg still, Sita, I haven't finished yet.'

'I thought I felt you take the band off,' Sita exclaimed. The elation had vanished abruptly. There was an edge of panic in her voice now. 'What's gone wrong? Has something gone wrong? What's wrong?'

'Nothing's wrong.' The Doctor tried to sound reassuring. 'It's taking a bit longer that's all.'

'It can't take longer we haven't got any longer. They're back on. They've switched them back on.'

'I know,' the Doctor said.

Sita was not really listening. 'Are you lying to me?' she demanded.

'No,' he said.

She had closed her eyes. She was breathing faster. 'Has it already happened?' Her voice was rising. There was a scream coiled in it, waiting. 'It's already happened hasn't it? You *are* lying to me. I can't feel my foot. I can't feel my foot.' And then she opened her eyes and said more quietly, 'I'm sorry. That was thoroughly feeble of me. It's just that I was so close to getting away with it...'

'You still are,' the Doctor said. The discarded band on the seat beside him had stopped contracting. There was a design limit. The band on her ankle had stopped contracting too. It had also stopped expanding under the influence of the sonic screwdriver. He switched off the screwdriver and waited for a moment to make sure the expanded section did not go into reverse once the power was withdrawn. But nothing changed. It seemed that the bands stopped functioning altogether once they had performed fully and finally. 'I'll need the cutter,' he said.

There was thirty seconds of air left in the breather by the time Keefer worked his way to the top of the lecea hopper and scrambled out onto the darkened provisions deck of the

Ultraviolet Explorer. Lights came on almost immediately. He ducked for the cover of a gap between two of the storage bins, pulling the pistol as he moved. It took him several seconds to realise that motion detectors had responded to him and triggered the working lights automatically. He waited several more seconds and when he was sure no one was coming he stepped out of concealment and walked quickly towards the continuous elevators. These open-fronted tubes in which rising and descending platforms constantly moved had no access doors or indicators. This was the reason the hakai-warrior, on his way down to investigate the security warning, saw Keefer fractionally before Keefer saw him. Either that or the Fat Boys were faster in every respect than Finbar had suggested.

The huge figure, naked except for a sword belt and a scarlet battle thong, launched himself at Keefer drawing a razor-sharp short sabre as he came. With pseudo-grav about forty per cent of standard, the man's body-fat mattered a lot less than the reflexes and balance that were the basics of his hakai fighting discipline. This was a killing advantage and the Fat Boy knew it. Easy confidence took the edge off his immediate technique. His initial blade work was casual. It was all Keefer needed. With furiously icy precision he leaned just outside the first slashing arc of the sword and shot the hakai-warrior squarely between the eyes. The huge corpse flopped and slid across the deck. By the time it came to rest against a storage hopper Keefer was already on an elevator platform rising towards the accommodation level.

The *Ultraviolet Explorer* had been constructed from the inside out. Apart from the standard requirements for radiation shields, micro-meteorite protection systems and the heavy-duty pseudo-grav spin generators the design engineers had not been concerned about outer shell shape or build-strength. The space-yacht was an inter-orbital cruiser with no capacity for the structural strains or the power drains of planet-fall. It was a sprawling construct whose basic purpose, as it drifted on its way, was to satisfy one

woman's desire for comfort, pleasure and absolute privacy. Somewhere at its heart the cabin and staterooms of the Lady Hakai lay behind security barriers so subtle that most of the crew had no idea where they began, let alone how to penetrate them. When the whim took their mistress, favoured individuals, including the most talented of the Fat Boys, were summoned to the inner sanctum. But access was a blind double- reverse routine, and once she had tired of their company there was no possibility that anyone could return uninvited.

Neither structural logic nor personal experience therefore offered a clue to the precise location of the fabled inheritress of the greatest dynastic fortune yet generated by Western-zone industry. Had Keefer known this when he stepped off the elevator platform he would probably have tackled the problem differently. As it was, he decided to search the ship methodically. No one had any idea yet that he was on board and when they found the body they would still know less about what was happening than he did. He reasoned that they had the advantage of home ground but all the other edges were his.

He moved down the companionway in front of him towards what looked like a recreational or maybe an eating area. Given the size of the hakai-warrior he had faced it seemed likely that food and recreation would be closely linked. Fat Boys didn't get to be that size without seriously dedicated feeding and you didn't do that unless you enjoyed it. So the chances were that some of them would be at it whatever the hour. He paused and looked for a way round but there didn't seem to be one. He checked and cocked the gun and ghosted forward. When he was close enough for the sight lines to be unobstructed he saw there were indeed two of the elite bodyguards squatting on narrow stools, their powerful legs crossed and their shaved heads bent over bowls of steaming food. On straw mats in front of them there were piles of pale vegetables and large bowls of freshly cooked lecea seed and hot pancakes. The cost of just getting what they were eating to where they were eating it would have kept a family of six

for ten years back home, Keefer reckoned, and he couldn't even guess at the basic price of the lecea and the flour and all the rest of the raw materials. The woman was rich enough certainly. She could have had that android modified and sent to kill him. Gods in a gun-ship, she could afford to have sent more than one. Her mistake was not to. She had underestimated him. It was a mistake he intended to make her regret.

Keeping his movements casual and relaxed and taking care not to look directly at the two huge men, Keefer strolled across the mess to the companionway on the other side. The gun was still cocked and ready but neither of the Fat Boys paid any attention to him. When he operated the access door and ducked through the dilating iris his ears and nose told him without the need to glance back that the hakai-warriors were still concerned only with their food.

As the seal whispered closed behind him Keefer's focus was already on the corridor ahead and the second set of continuous elevators at the far end. He lowered the hammer on the pistol and then re-cocked it. The platforms appeared to be moving faster than the last lot and there was no way of telling who or what might come plunging out in response to his unauthorised presence.

'I'm impressed,' the pilot said, the proximity speaker making it sound as though he was right beside Leela in the sleep harness. 'Takes most people much longer to adapt to pseudo-grav. I can't sleep the way you do. I've got to be honest it makes me feel distinctly queasy as soon as I close my eyes. I get the full whirling pits. Not a pleasant sensation. Especially when you haven't been drinking. So what's your secret then? Clean living and a clear conscience?' He chortled. 'If it is, it's too high a price to pay.'

Her secret, Leela thought, was that she knew he was watching her; not all the time but she did not know when exactly so she had to assume it was all the time; and she was determined not to let him see that this pseudo-grav was making her feel more giddy and sick than weightlessness had

done. She wanted him to think that she was strong and healthy and had no problem coping. If he believed that completely then it would be easier for him to accept it when she faked her accident and injury, or her illness, she had not yet decided which it should be. If she did it properly though he might be confident enough to come from wherever he was hiding and open the prison cell he was keeping her in. 'Perhaps,' she said, 'it is my warrior training.'

'You mean killing people makes you fitter and healthier?' he said. 'You've got to stay fitter and healthier than them I suppose.' He chortled again. 'As a matter of interest: how did a nice girl like you get into the killing trade?'

Leela said, 'How did you get into the kidnapping trade?' She unstrapped the harness and drifted down to that surface of the cell that the pseudo-grav had made the floor.

'I asked first,' the pilot said.

'My tribe are called the Sevateem,' Leela said. 'We have always been warriors.' She kicked off from the floor and flew in a shallow arc to the end of the cell.

'All of you? Do you fight among yourselves then or do you only fight other people?'

'We fought the Tesh and each other.'

'How come I've never heard of you or them?'

Leela said, 'None of my people are here in this world.'

'You mean you're the last one standing?' He sounded genuinely impressed. 'You killed everyone else. No wonder they want you.'

Leela did not bother to ask who *they* were because she knew he would not tell her: at least not until she got her hands on him. 'Now it is your turn to answer,' she said. 'The Sevateem are known to be warriors. What is your tribe called and are they known to be skulking, cowardly kidnappers?'

'We are called the scumbags,' he said, 'and yes we are known to be skulking, cowardly kidnappers. But it's a living.'

Leela slid back the stiff plastic curtain that partitioned off the washing and waste-elimination cubicle. 'I would like privacy now,' she said.

‘Like I told you before, there’s no surveillance in the ablutions unit,’ the pilot said. ‘We scumbags may be skulking, cowardly kidnapers but we do have our standards. We’re not perverts you know. We’re not even killers come to think.’

‘I do not know what you are,’ Leela said and half stepped, half drifted into the cramped space and pulled the screening curtain across.

‘Do you want me to turn off the microphones?’ he asked. ‘I’ll turn off the microphones if you want me to.’ Leela had noticed that the proximity speaker kept the sound of the voice on the other side of the curtain but she knew that proved nothing. A device that could make the voice sound close to you could as easily make it sound further away. It certainly did not prove he could not see her and that was what she needed to know. It would help any plan to work if she was sure there was a place in the cell where he could not see her without physically coming in. She deliberately did not answer him.

‘I know some people are embarrassed,’ he went on, ‘by the noise their bodies make... the noise of their bodily functions. It seems a bit stupid to me to be ashamed of what’s natural but there you go.’ She still did not answer him. ‘If you’re a hairy-arsed pilot-type privacy’s not something you worry too much about because in space you haven’t got the space if you see what I mean. You get used to it or you get another profession. But I can understand that it matters to some people. People who aren’t used to it and... you don’t want to talk about this do you? Right...’ His voice trailed off. After a moment he said, ‘I’ll turn off the microphones. And I’ll stop talking and get on with some routine system checks and leave you to get on with...’ He sighed wryly. ‘I talk too much, don’t I?’

Yes, Leela thought, you talk too much. It is a weakness of people who spend long periods alone. Sometimes it is just a weakness of mind. Whichever it was with this man it gave her an advantage. People who talk too much never listen enough.

Her trainer had said that once after lecturing her and the other warrior trainees for a long time...

Silently she stood waiting behind the curtain. Would he know that she was simply standing there? It would not be definite proof but she felt she should be able to tell from his reactions: how long he took to check on her and his tone of voice when he did; whether or not he could see what was happening. She waited. Of course it was possible that he was cleverer than he sounded and cleverer than her. She waited. It would make her angry to think that he was using her to amuse himself but apart from that it would cost her nothing. She waited. It only now occurred to her that she no longer felt sick. She waited. Would he ever speak?

‘Leela?’ The voice from outside the curtain was concerned and slightly irritated. ‘Are you all right? You haven’t fallen asleep in there have you?’

‘I asked for privacy,’ Leela said.

‘And you got it.’

‘You have turned the microphones back on.’ She was not entirely sure what they were but the Doctor said a thing *was* what it *did*. And she knew what microphones did: they listened.

‘I was worried,’ the pilot said, sounding worried.

Why?’ Leela asked. She pulled back the curtain and half stepped and half drifted out of the cubicle.

‘Space is an unforgiving place.’ The pilot’s voice was earnest now. ‘I’ve known people who’ve been fine one minute and the next: kershplatto.’

Leela asked, ‘What is kershplatto?’ She hopped and glided to the other end of the cell.

‘Sudden decompression and you’re looking at Fatpatty gutburgers. Extra large and undercooked. Trust me, mushy meat never looked less appetising.’

Leela thought she had already spotted three of the glass eye devices by which he watched her but she was sure there must be others. She deliberately did not look at any of the ones she knew about. ‘But that could not happen without you knowing it?’ she said as she took food tablets from the

feeding station dispenser. It was only the suggestion of a question but as she expected it was all the prompting the pilot needed.

‘There are plenty of other things that could have happened while you were in that unit. Heart attack, aneurysm, you could have knocked yourself out, you could have had a pseudo-grav breathing spasm, you could have been sick and choked on your vomit. All that stuff has happened without warning to perfectly fit and healthy people.’

‘Is the unit that dangerous?’ Leela asked innocently.

‘Weightlessness and pseudo-grav are that dangerous. Space is that dangerous. At least in something as basic as this yacht it is. We didn’t evolve out here, we’re not adapted to cope. We survive by being constantly on our guard.’

It sounded to Leela as though he was quoting his own training. She was fairly sure now that the pilot was only what he seemed to be. She was fairly sure that she could outwit him.

By the time the runner was approaching the Doctor’s New Way training compound Ronick had bound Sita’s injuries and they had all done their best to identify and hide any evidence of what had happened. Although the other two were quite confident that there would be no alarm raised and no direct pursuit as a result of the jailbreak, the Doctor was not entirely reassured. It hardly counted as a jailbreak, he thought, if nobody was going to take any notice of it. Surely, he had suggested, somebody would at least be detailed to look for the body.

‘Why bother?’ Ronick had said. ‘Why waste the manpower? She’s going to bleed out and her body will turn up eventually. Someone will find it and report it.’

‘But it won’t turn up,’ the Doctor said. ‘And they won’t find it and report it. Are you sure that isn’t going to register on some computer somewhere?’

‘Trust me,’ Ronick said. ‘Nobody gives a scuff about runaways from police lock-ups. As far as the system is concerned Sita Benovides is dead.’

Sita looked at the new ID Ronick had furnished her with. 'Long live Sula Baronne,' she said and grimaced slightly. 'Pretty downmarket sort of name.'

'Look on the bright side,' he said. 'You can keep your monogrammed luggage and jewellery.'

'Nobody called Sula Baronne would have monogrammed luggage and jewellery,' she said with mock disdain.

He shrugged. 'So we'll get you some tattoos and a nose piercing.'

The runner slowed as it reached the perimeter of the compound but, unexpectedly, it was not required to stop. The Doctor was puzzled by the empty gatehouse and the upraised barrier. 'My security staff obviously aren't paid enough,' he mused as the runner completed its navigation programme and slowly drew to a halt in front of the weapons and therapy annexe. The three of them got out and looked around. There was no one to be seen on the practice ground and there were no spectators in the viewing stand. The whole place was deserted and silent. 'Isn't this the point where one of us says it's quiet, and one of the others says too quiet,' the Doctor remarked.

'Do the training sessions normally finish this early?' Sita asked.

'Not as far as I'm aware,' the Doctor said and smiled one of his randomly vivid smiles. 'I have tended to delegate the day to day running of the...' he gestured round, '...circus I suppose you'd call it.'

'No, that's not what I'd call it,' she said. 'I'd call it crude, I'd call it exploitative, I'd call it a corruption of the spirit of the noble contest.'

'The end of the world as you know it?' the Doctor offered.

'Hardly,' she snorted.

'The noble contest will rise above such crude exploitation,' the Doctor said. 'It has always been greater than any particular fight or any particular school of fighting.'

'Sounds like a quote,' she said.

'Your friend and mine, the State Security Minister.'

Sita scowled darkly. 'It's going to be a real pleasure breaking that bastard.'

At that moment she reminded the Doctor a lot of Leela. 'You think you can do that?' he asked.

'I think I can die trying,' she said.

'Shall we go inside and see if we can find out what's been happening to my entertainment empire?' the Doctor said. 'Where it's gone perhaps? And we can see whether my wandering star has returned, or at least called home and left a message.'

From the other side of the runner Ronick said, 'I don't think that would be such a good idea.' Elaborately casual he wandered to the driver's door. 'It's time to leave,' he murmured. 'Keep smiling both of you and then without hurrying get back into the runner. I'll drive this time. Try not to look as though you're about to make a break for it.'

'What's going on?' Sita asked quietly through a fixed smile.

'It's a trap,' Ronick muttered through an equally inappropriate grin. 'Don't know who it's for but even if it's not for us we should probably try to avoid falling into it...'

'Surely we already have,' she whispered.

The Doctor turned to face them. He beamed. 'Thank you for the ride,' he said loudly and warmly. 'It was most kind of you to help me. I do understand that you must be on your way now but please do call on me any time you're passing.' He doffed his hat to Sita and made a small, heel-clicking bow to Ronick. 'Now I've wasted enough of your valuable time so please do go. Now.'

Sita got back into the runner. Ronick hesitated. 'There are armed men in there,' he muttered.

'It's a fight school,' the Doctor murmured.

'That's not what I mean and you know it.'

'I'll keep them busy while you do a runner in the runner.'

'While I do what?'

'Just go. Keep in touch. If you find out anything of significance let me know.' The Doctor turned towards the building. 'Off you go now,' he said cheerily, walking away and

waving without looking back. 'You don't want to be late. Thanks again.'

As he reached the doorway the Doctor heard the runner leaving. Good, he thought. If Ronick was not just being paranoid there was a distinct possibility that it was Sita they were looking for. Of course if it was Sita they were looking for why had they let the runner drive away like that? Would anyone really have been fooled by his performance? Unless they didn't know what she looked like. He pushed through the door into the gloomy, unlit foyer. Or they could just be useless at their job. It was odd how you always assumed that people knew how to do what they were doing. Everyone assumed he knew how to be an agent, for example. Lights came on abruptly and four men brandishing handguns stepped out of the shadows and confronted him. 'Don't move,' one of them bellowed, 'and put your hands behind your head.'

The Doctor smiled at him. 'I can't do both,' he said, 'so make up your mind which it's to be.'

'Put your hands behind your head while you've still got a head,' the man snarled thrusting the gun in his face.

The Doctor's smile broadened. 'That's not bad,' he said. 'A word of advice though. It's been my experience that threats are more effective if they're quiet. You'd be amazed how threatening a whisper can sound. That whole snarling thing lacks punch somehow.' Even as he said it the Doctor thought *punch is not a good prompt to give him under the circumstances*. And sure enough the man immediately punched him in the midriff. The Doctor put his hands behind his head and said through gritted teeth, 'That on the other hand doesn't lack punch. But it does lack subtlety.'

The man hit him again. 'Try this for subtlety,' he whispered. 'You are under arrest for the murders of Pet Sanderonne and Raf Lee.'

'Never heard of them,' the Doctor said. 'And it's entirely against my principles to kill anyone I've never heard of. Or indeed anyone.'

'Not even when they've murdered your best fighter?'

The Doctor suddenly went cold. ‘Murdered whom?’ he asked, afraid he already knew the answer.

‘Leela,’ the man said. ‘Sanderonne and Lee kidnapped Leela and then killed her.’

‘Why would they have done that?’ the Doctor managed to say. We should have left, he thought. As soon as I recognised all this for the sick barbarous stupidity it was, I should have insisted that we left. This is my fault. Stupid girl, this is my fault. Only she wasn’t stupid and this was all my fault.

‘Not our concern,’ the man said. ‘We’ll never know their motives but we know yours and that’s enough for us.’

And then suddenly the Doctor thought *why should I believe these people: they’re wrong about me why should they be right about anything else?* ‘Not in any court of law I’ve ever been in,’ he said.

‘Don’t worry we have all the evidence we need.’

‘I’m sure you have,’ the Doctor said. ‘What about Leela’s body?’

‘What about it?’

‘May I see it?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘They haven’t got her body, Doctor.’ The tall man with the smooth round face coming into the foyer from the direction of the locker rooms looked familiar. ‘We think the abductors destroyed the body after they had to kill her when their plan went wrong.’ It was the Enforcer of the Guild of Agents the Doctor realised.

‘We being...?’ the Doctor asked.

‘The police.’

The Doctor said, ‘I didn’t realise you were a policeman.’

‘I’m not.’ The Enforcer contrived to look shocked and slightly affronted but it didn’t seem entirely convincing to the Doctor. ‘I’ve been negotiating on your behalf and the police have agreed that as a registered member of the Guild of Agents you may exercise your professional right to be processed under the direct authority of the Court of Attack: He pulled the Doctor’s hands down from behind his head and

drew him to one side. He lowered his voice conspiratorially. 'That way at least you'll be treated in a civilised fashion and there will be expert advice available to help you to decide on an appropriate defence strategy.'

A thought struck the Doctor. 'Is that why Jerro Fanson was there and not in police custody?'

The Enforcer looked blank. 'Who?'

'He was one of your members who was charged with murder.'

The Enforcer shook his head. 'It's possible one of my subordinates handled it...' He shrugged. 'I only become personally involved with our more important members.' He smiled and patted the Doctor's arm.

The Doctor ignored the attempt to underline the obviously complimentary reference to his professional status. 'Come to think of it,' he said, 'he was an agent whose best fighter disappeared.'

'Coincidences happen,' the Enforcer said uncomfortably. 'Client poaching happens too I'm afraid:

'The fighter's name was Keefer.'

'Doesn't ring any bells, I'm sorry,' the Enforcer said and took the Doctor's arm. 'The Doctor is ready,' he said to the four waiting policemen, 'to go to the Court of Attack lock-up. He will agree to the use of temporary restraints if you feel they are called for.'

'Will he?' the Doctor said, playing for time. 'I don't remember him agreeing to that.' It looked as though he was going to have to make a break for it and hope that the police were bad shots. He couldn't allow himself to be locked up again and lose any chance to sort out this mess. And besides that, this was showing all the signs of being one of those brain-threatening frame-ups that seemed to be happening with startling regularity. Four armed policemen might be a bit of a risk but he didn't really have much choice as far as he could see. Two more policemen came into the foyer from the direction of the locker rooms. 'Nothing,' one of them said. Another one wandered in and shook his head. The Doctor decided to re-examine his plan. His natural optimism and his

best efforts to think positively did not convince him that the chances of breaking free of seven armed policemen and then escaping in one piece were good.

‘I think temporary restraints are called for,’ the man who had hit the Doctor said. ‘In fact I’m calling for them.’ He gestured to the man who had wandered in last. ‘They’re in the first runner. Go fetch.’

The man went outside but came back in almost immediately, followed by an irritated-looking Ronick. ‘What are you doing with my prisoner?’ he demanded, jerking his head in the direction of the Doctor. ‘I didn’t bring him here for your scuffling benefit.’

‘Driftkiller?’ the man who had done the hitting said. ‘I said that was you.’ He glanced at the others. ‘Didn’t I say that was him? I said that was you.’

‘Right, well we’ve established that it’s me,’ Ronick said. ‘Now what are you doing with my prisoner?’

‘You let him go.’

Ronick gestured at himself and his presence in the foyer. ‘It scuffling looks like it doesn’t it,’ he said scathingly.

‘As it happens,’ the man said, ‘yes it does.’

‘We left him here to collect some personal effects, you scuffwit. You know: valuable personal effects?’

‘There isn’t anything - we’ve checked.’

‘You’ve checked,’ Ronick snorted. ‘No problem then. You and this bunch of rejects from traffic control have checked.’ He shook his head and sighed. ‘You’re not dealing with some small-time thief here. This is the Doctor and he’s in it and digging deep. Why do you suppose I sent him in on his own?’

The Doctor smiled thinly. ‘I’m sorry to have wasted your time, Sergeant Ronick,’ he said with what he hoped was the right note of knowing disdain. ‘I’d quite forgotten that I keep absolutely nothing of value on the premises.’

Ronick stared at him speculatively for a moment or two and then turned his attention back to the policeman. ‘What I propose,’ Ronick said, making it ponderously clear that it was much more than a proposal, ‘is that my driver and I take

him for a little tour in the runner while you and this fine body of men make yourselves scarce.'

'Yeah we're going to do that.'

'I'll see you and your lads are looked after.'

'He's under arrest.' The man cast a nervous glance towards the Enforcer. 'He's under arrest for murder and he's not even in restraints.'

'I'll put a couple of temporaries on him.' Ronick flashed the remains of one of Sita's wrist bands, taking care to conceal the cut. 'What've you got to lose? He makes a move, I'll kill him, right there right then. Save us all a lot of hassle.'

The Enforcer bristled with sudden indignation. 'The Doctor is under my personal protection,' he said. 'I am here to make sure that nothing happens to jeopardise his legal position, and to escort him directly to the Court of Attack.'

'Who is this again?' Ronick asked.

'I am the Enforcer of the Guild of Agents.'

Ronick said, 'I'm impressed. Now shut your scuffling mouth or you'll find yourself under arrest along with this curly-haired streak of slime.' He beckoned the Doctor with an imperious finger. 'And don't be here when we get back, all right?' he said to the assembled policemen as he bundled the Doctor through the door and hustled him out across the compound towards the waiting runner.

'I don't think I care for curly-haired streak of slime,' the Doctor murmured.

'I think it sums you up quite well considering,' Ronick muttered.

They clambered into the back of the runner and Sita set it in motion. 'Was it him they were waiting for?' she asked.

'Oh yes,' Ronick said smugly. 'They had him on his way to the electric scalp massage.'

'I'm accused of a double murder,' the Doctor said.

'Did you do it?' she asked

'Did you?'

'I'm the only one here who isn't a fugitive from justice,' Ronick said. 'All I have to do is wait until the price on you two peaks and I can retire with honour and dignity and

enough money to indulge myself to death.’ He smiled and his eyes vanished briefly behind their folds of flesh.

‘What about your friends in the force?’ the Doctor asked. ‘Won’t they report you to your superiors?’

‘He hasn’t got any,’ Sita said. ‘None that he acknowledges anyway.’

‘Your friend the Enforcer bothers me,’ said Ronick.

‘And a duellist named Keefer bothers him,’ the Doctor said.

‘Keefer?’ Sita asked. ‘Something special about him?’

‘He’s disappeared,’ the Doctor said thoughtfully. ‘Leela’s disappeared too. She vanished when she went looking for him. His agent was a man named Jerro Fanson. On the basis of what’s been happening I’d say he was framed for murder. Was that because he was Reefer’s agent I wonder? I’ve asked questions about Reefer too.’ He looked at Sita. ‘You obviously haven’t though. His name meant nothing to you.’

Sita said, ‘I have been asking questions about a mystery man who went through ‘Space Main security like it wasn’t there. I didn’t get a chance to find out what his name was but I know he was fast and I know he was clever, and he could have been a duellist.’

‘He could have been this Reefer then,’ Ronick said. ‘So my feeling is that what we do now is assume they are one and the same and go and look for him.’

‘That’s pretty thin,’ Sita remarked.

‘That’s what I was thinking,’ the Doctor said. ‘That really is rather thin.’

The fat policeman smiled chubbily. ‘Thin works for me,’ he said.

Chapter Fourteen

Keefer was disappointed with himself. This was not the way to approach the problem. He stepped over the body of the Fat Boy he had just shot and took the short sabre from his not-yet-cold but definitely dead hand. He was a professional with an instinct for counterattack and yet here he was running round this huge indulgence of a space monstrosity like some psycho brawler with a grudge, constantly looking for a fight. From time to time he confronted and killed a ceremonial security man for no other reason than that they had got in his way and tried to kill him. He examined the razor-sharp sabre, hefting it and admiring its lightness and its perfect balance. It was a nice weapon but no match for a handgun, not even a handgun with reduced muzzle velocity. Why have a security force who dressed in battle thongs and used these things?

He smelled the food on the second hakai-warrior fractionally before he heard him, and heard him fractionally before he saw the movement flicker into the extreme of his peripheral vision. In a single smooth action he ducked to one side and stepped forward, pushing upward and turning in a pirouette made possible by the reduced gravity. As he spun he threw the short sabre at the ample gut of the onrushing giant. Although knife throwing was one of the secondary disciplines Keefer had been working on before he set out on this journey, he was coldly pleased and professionally satisfied to see the blade plunge home, stopping the huge man in his murderous tracks. It didn't look as though he would have to waste a precious bullet to get past this one.

Grimly the hakai-warrior glared at him and then with a grunt staggered on trying to get within striking distance. Keefer took several steps backwards. The man stopped again. He was clearly losing focus and his strength was draining

away. He staggered forward, stopped and stood swaying uncertainly, staring at Keefer with unseeing inward-looking eyes. He dropped his own blade and tugged at the handle of the one that was stuck in him. It slipped in his hands and he tried again, pulling it at an angle. The savage sharpness of the blade cut through him quickly and easily. He fell to his knees and his intestines flopped wetly out onto the deck, and he died.

'You people eat too much and your blades are too sharp,' Keefer muttered as the reaction to the fight made him shiver and feel momentarily nauseous. He picked up the blade that the man had dropped. He wondered briefly why the hakai-warriors didn't throw these short sabres when the chance was there. They were perfectly balanced for throwing. 'You could have thrown me dead as soon as you saw me.' Maybe it was against their code. No guns, no throwing. 'Too easy for you, Fat Boy?' A lot of warrior cults were more interested in rules and superstitions than in getting the job done. It was a sort of arrogance and like all arrogance it was based on stupidity. 'You're underestimating me. You and the Lady Hakai are seriously underestimating me.' He moved on down the corridor. Getting the job done was all any of it was about. Finding her and finding out what was going on: that was all he had to do. Hakai-warriors might have a whole different agenda, but that was their problem. His problem was that he could spend a lifetime wandering about and never come close to his target. She could be anywhere. She could remain hidden and wait for him to die of old age. And sooner or later the Fat Boys would start to take him seriously enough to forget some of their superstitions and cut through some of their rules: he swung the blade a couple of times to loosen himself up again. This was too much like an open contract: they would keep coming without challenge and he would keep killing them until he missed one... He ran quickly through his sense-sharpening routine. He needed a new tactic, one that would bring the Lady Hakai to him. He must get hold of something she valued and force her to come for it. But what does a woman who can have anything she wants

really value? It had to be something that she needed. He had to take something that she couldn't do without. And then it struck him. It was obvious, he realised: he had to take the ship.

She lay almost completely outside the range of the lenses of the watching eyes. Part of one foot was all that could be seen. It twitched and cramped in barely discernible spasms.

'Leela?' The pilot's voice was panicky. 'Leela! Leela what's happening, has something happened? Leela?'

She lay behind the curtain of the ablutions unit, with her foot part way through the small gap she had left, and faked the involuntary movements that might be the result of striking her head, or choking, or whatever it was that had struck her down as she was entering the small cubicle.

'Leela don't do this to me! I'm in no mood to be scuffled about with.'

He sounded almost convinced, Leela thought. He needed a bit more encouragement. She made the smallest of whimpering, gargling sounds in her throat and twitched her foot. Was it enough, she wondered? She knew she had only one possible chance at this. If she did not fool him now, if he saw through the ruse, she could not try it or anything like it again.

'Leela I know there's nothing wrong with you.' The pilot's words were saying one thing but his voice was saying something different. She could hear his uncertainty. 'Stop playing games, Leela. It's not funny. You must think I'm a complete moron. I know there's nothing wrong with you. Stop joking around or I shall get angry with you. I can make things unpleasant for you if I get angry with you.' She resisted the temptation to make bigger twitches and to groan more loudly. It was like trapping sunbirds in the clearings beyond the village. Jerk the bait about too much and you frightened them off. You had to use small movements, though, if you wanted to keep them interested. You could not catch sunbirds with bait that looked dead. It would be no use if the pilot thought there was nothing he could do for her. If he thought she was already dead, her plan would be dead

too. She arched her foot a little and sucked air tightly into the back of her throat so that it made a faint rattling gasp.

‘Leela, if this is your way of amusing yourself at my expense I have to tell you I am not impressed. I thought we were... well friends might be too strong a word but I thought at least we’d come to an understanding. I thought we were sort of in this together you know? I mean I’m only transporting you. I’m not part of the kidnap team. I’m not part of the whole conspiracy thing. If it comes to that I’m on your side. I don’t mean you any harm. I just want to take the money and run, that’s all I want to do.’ She could hear it clearly in his voice now. He was talking as much to himself as to her. He had almost decided. He was almost sure she was no longer able to hear him. He was almost ready to come to her. Careful, she thought, careful, this is when the sunbirds were most likely to take fright and run away.

Leela grunted through her nose, a small clenched snore, and set her foot drumming, heel tapping the floor in a continuous spasm.

‘In the names of all the gods,’ the pilot exclaimed, ‘don’t you die on me. I won’t get paid and I will get dead. Don’t you die on me you stupid little scuffer.’

Leela was exultant. She had him. He was coming. He was unlocking the bulkhead doors and the airlock doors, and he was coming. She was going to be free of this prison. Would he come armed she wondered? Would he come armed and angry? She had not really thought much beyond baiting him to within reach. It made no difference, she would disarm him; she would kill him if she had to. No, she must not kill him since she needed him to work the speeder yacht. She had not planned beyond this, she suddenly realised, because she had not really believed that such a simple scheme would succeed. Keep it simple, her trainer always said. Plans go wrong; complicated plans go wrong complicatedly. This plan would *not* go wrong; she would not let it go wrong. She felt a change in the background vibrations. Was that the doors unlocking? She stopped drumming her heel. She had considered going to wait by the cell door to ambush the pilot once she was sure

he was coming to her, but she had discarded that idea. Even after he left the flight deck from where he watched and from where he controlled everything he might still be able to see inside the cell. The only place she was sure he could not see was here, where she was. It was only here she could be sure of the element of surprise. She would have to sacrifice some freedom of movement to get it, but surprise was the essential thing: everything else she could make up for.

She listened. She had not heard the entrance to the cell close in the first place so she was not sure what sound it would make when it opened. Come on, she thought. She was ready. Where was he? He was taking longer than she had expected. Had he given up on her? Did he think she was dead? Had she made a mistake that he had spotted. Was the panic in his voice just pretence? Was it him who was playing games after all? She knew she had failed. Then she heard it: the soft thud of door fastenings being drawn back, a brief sough of air. The door was opening. She waited for a moment and then she began to twitch her foot in single random spasms. She heard his voice: 'Don't be scuffling dead. Don't you be scuffling dead.' But there was something strange and muffled about it. 'Even dying you're a killer, you murderous little scuffler.' He was coming closer but the voice was not clear: it was dull with an echo that was not quite an echo. 'My employer doesn't take disappointment well. Or at all in fact.' What was it about the voice? It sounded close but distant at the same time. The curtain was snatched back and Leela pushed herself up and kicked herself forward. The pseudo-grav made the move more controllable so that she vaulted over the figure that was bending towards where she had been laying. As she jumped over the pilot she realised that he was wearing some sort of protective suit and a helmet that enclosed his head. She twisted herself round and grabbed at the helmet with both hands. Bouncing her knees high against his back to get as much leverage as possible in the reduced gravity, she pulled as hard as she could.

It would have been a good fighting move against someone who was not wearing an emergency pressure suit. The

emergency pressure suit, worn as a precaution against a breach in the integrity of the speeder yacht's hull, was not intended for fighting in. The helmet's neck bracing was not designed to be flexible in the direction that Leela was pulling. It broke immediately and the helmet itself became a lever pulling on the head inside. The lever's force was concentrated against the pilot's neck. It would have taken a lot less than Leela's agile strength to snap the vulnerable column of bone and sever the spinal cord. She knew she had killed him even before she felt the life go out of him.

Leela was angry with herself. She had not intended to do more than overpower this man. She struggled to get his helmet off, wrenching and turning it until she freed it from the joint seals. She looked at the thin dead face of the pilot. He looked older and more tired than he had sounded. His head had been shaved and the hair that was beginning to grow back was grey like the stubble on his sunken cheeks. It shocked her a little to think that this old man had been her adversary. She felt a pang of guilt. He had been no real threat by the look of him. But he was her jailer and he was involved in kidnapping her and what had happened was as much his fault as it was hers. More his fault. He had chosen to be here, she had not. He had admitted he was greedy and that was why he was doing it. He had claimed not to be stupid but greedy and stupid usually went together. He had been easy to fool and easy to kill. 'And now I am in real trouble old man,' she said aloud to the corpse. 'I do not know how to work this speeder yacht. I do not know where I am or where I am going.'

She looked at the box he had dropped, which had drifted to a stop against the side of the cubicle. 'Why were you wearing that stupid outfit? Did you think it would protect you from me?' It reminded her of one of the sacred relics which the shaman had used back in the village and it was about as useful. She retrieved the box and opened it. She recognised the medical kit even though she had no idea what the individual items were for. She checked the corpse. He had not been armed. She shook her head and sighed ruefully.

Plans go wrong: simple plans simply go wrong simply. At least the cell door was unlocked.

She went across to the open airlock. It was a narrow chamber that had to be entered head first or feet first. She peered in. How did you work it, she wondered, when the space inside was so small? She crawled in head first. Behind her the door closed and locked itself automatically. She had never been frightened of tight spaces, claustrophobia the Doctor said such a fear was called, yet for the briefest moment she had to fight the panic that threatened to blot out everything but her desperate need to get out of there. She knew that if she gave way to the feeling she would lash and kick and die like a terrified animal. Fear opens your eyes: panic closes your mind, she heard her trainer say. Say it, he bellowed; fear opens your eyes: panic closes your mind, they had repeated. Say it again, he yelled. 'Fear opens your eyes: panic closes your mind,' she said aloud.

Leela opened her eyes. This airlock was a device made to hold in air, she reasoned, that was why it was called an air lock. It was not intended to trap people inside itself. If it was intended to do that it would not have a light. Of course, as the Doctor had told her several times, devices often did what they were not intended to do, but it still seemed unlikely that this airlock would be so badly thought out that it would act as an accidental mantrap. There must be a way of opening it from the inside. She looked for a control panel. It was there by her feet: almost impossible to reach. Obviously you were meant to face the same direction from whichever side you entered. Head first from one side, feet first from the other. She had got in the wrong way round. Perhaps this was a mantrap. But it was too simple a mistake not to have been thought of and planned for. She craned towards the panel and saw, also by her feet, on the inside of the door itself, there was a lever. Tentatively she pushed it up with her toe. The door opened. She pulled herself out and back into the cell. Taking the medical kit with her this time she climbed back into the airlock feet first, so that she could reach the small control panel with her hand.

It did not occur to Leela to wonder what the airlock was actually there for until she looked closely at the buttons and indicators on the panel. There were several more than were necessary simply to lock and unlock two doors. And if an air lock was intended to keep air in, she thought, and there was air in her cell, did that mean there was no air on the other side of the other door? That was why he was wearing that stupid outfit, she realised abruptly. It was not to protect him from her, it was to help him to breathe. This needed thinking about, she thought and climbed out of the airlock a second time.

The mistake, the Doctor acknowledged to himself, when he finally came to think about it all, was not that he had confused movement with action but that he had allowed movement and action to confuse him. There were questions he should have asked and answers he should have questioned, but he was much too busy chasing and being chased to pay proper attention to what was really going on. Weightlessness hadn't helped his concentration much either.

'He gets a refund in cash,' Ronick explained, 'a nice chunky brick of Sumanan dollars, and this he waves around like a brain-dead tourist with "Rob me I'm a tourist" tattooed across his arse. This draws the attention of our dink friend.'

'Which is where he gets his next change of identity,' Sita said. 'We're assuming deliberately, yes?'

'Unless you believe in lucky coincidences. And the Doctor doesn't for one, do you Doctor?'

'Dink friend?' the Doctor asked.

'Western-zone features,' Sita said.

The Doctor nodded. 'Not somewhere called Dinkland then.'

Sita half smiled. 'Ronick is...'

'A law unto himself,' the Doctor suggested.

'You don't have to apologise for me,' Ronick put in.

'I wasn't going to,' Sita said. 'I was going to say you were a fat racist pig.'

'That's all right then,' Ronick said. 'Never apologise. That is one thing you officer-class types have taught the rest of us.'

Never apologise: just repeat yourself, only in a much louder voice.’ He raised his voice. ‘So. Our dink friend, or violent thief and all around scumsucker if you prefer, gets his in the cheap washrooms having seriously underestimated this Keefer character.’

They were sitting in the partial gravity of the otherwise empty Class A lounge of the Hakai Orbital Transfer Station. Although he was probably the least uncomfortable of the three of them, the Doctor had found to his surprise that prolonged weightlessness was not something he was comfortable with. He had therefore been more than happy to accept the Class A hospitality upgrade that had been offered to him and his companions. He kept expecting to be detained but as yet there was no arrest warrant keyed to his ID. It appeared that his professional status as a Guild agent and his personal fame still made him a registered VIP even in out-of-the-way locations like the notorious Hakai OTS. In passing it did strike him that any reasonable computer system should be updated more quickly. It ought to have been straightforward to flag him up as a wanted fugitive and at the very least cancel the automatic privileges his ID carried. But then this was the same system that had not responded to the escape from custody of the corrupt and murderous Sita Benovides, so perhaps the delay was not that unexpected. General law enforcement and the formal Rules of Attack were linked but separate, and it was obviously the interpretation and enforcement of the Rules of Attack that took precedence. ‘I’m not sure what we’re doing out here,’ he said to Ronick. ‘Unless we have an actual identity for this person from the Western Zone, this is as far as we can go, isn’t it. We can’t follow Keefer any further if we don’t know who he is.’

‘As it happens,’ Ronick said grinning smugly, ‘I do know who he is and I think I know where he’s gone.’

The Doctor was vaguely disappointed. Wherever Ronick thought Keefer had gone it was unlikely to be back to the planet’s surface and he was almost sure that it was there that the answers must lie. It was there, too, that he should be investigating the mystery of Leela’s disappearance.

Although she was last sighted in Aerospace Main it did not necessarily follow that she had left the planet and it certainly did not indicate that she had come here. If you believed the myths most fugitives came to the Hakai OTS, and it did handle a lot of passenger and freight transits, but that was not evidence of anything. It didn't justify him being here pursuing a phantom. His promise to Jerro Fanson had become meaningless, if indeed it had ever meant anything. What would be the point of warning Keefer to keep his head down: the man seemed to be doing that without any prompting from anyone. Finding Leela, that was what was important and that was what he was in clanger of forgetting. Or was it, he wondered, merely that he was trying to justify going back to full gravity? 'Have you known this all along?' he asked. 'Or is it something you've found out since we got here?'

'What's that supposed to mean?' Ronick asked. 'Are you suggesting I've been holding out on you?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'It's a question,' he said, 'not a suggestion.' He smiled brightly. 'But as a matter of interest have you been holding out on us?'

'Why would I do that?'

'Why would you answer a question with a question?'

Ronick's eyes disappeared behind a smile. 'Because I'm being evasive of course.'

'Of course,' the Doctor agreed.

'That would be my theory too,' Sita said. 'And confessing doesn't make it more appealing.' Her voice was suddenly cold. 'Or less suspicious, Driftkiller. Sorry, you prefer Sergeant Ronick, don't you.'

The Doctor recognised the abrupt change of tone as a universal interrogator's trick and was fairly sure that Ronick did too, but for some reason the fat detective played along as though he was affected by such a simple technique.

'All right.' Ronick had stopped smiling. 'All right,' he said, sounding contrite, 'let's not get our tits in a tangle. We're all on the same side, remember?'

‘Are you sure about that?’ she said. ‘I’m beginning to have my doubts.’

‘And here was I,’ Ronick said, ‘thinking that saving your life would set your mind at rest on that score. Imagine my surprise... I didn’t have the information when we set out. It was waiting for me when we got here.’

‘Pointless to ask who from and how?’ the Doctor suggested.

‘Yes,’ Ronick said flatly.

‘But we’re supposed to trust it anyway,’ Sita said.

Ronick shrugged. ‘Your choice. Finding Keefer isn’t my main priority.’

‘That being?’ she said.

The Doctor said, ‘He’s waiting around for the price on us to go up.’

Ronick smiled his agreement. ‘You keep running: it keeps rising. I can’t lose.’

Sita sighed. ‘Who is he and where’s he gone?’ she asked.

‘His name’s Melly Finbar,’ Ronick said.

Sita looked unimpressed. ‘Doesn’t sound very Western Zone. Are you sure your informant is reliable?’

‘Not Keefer,’ Ronick said. ‘Him.’ He nodded in the direction of the entrance to the lounge.

The Doctor turned to see a slight young man drifting in a controlled stride towards them. He was obviously more used to the environment than any of them were.

‘Gentlemen,’ Finbar said as he landed neatly beside them, ‘and lady. I’m told you’re looking for this man.’ He proffered a small likeness of Keefer to the Doctor.

‘This is the infamous Keefer is it,’ the Doctor said, handing the holographic picture on to Sita.

‘Not the name he was using when I met him,’ Finbar said.

Sita said, ‘You’ve met him then. You actually met this man.’

‘I actually helped this man to get where he wanted to go. I can do the same for you. I can do better for you: I can take you where he went. I have a small, fast ship fuelling up on bay twenty-five even as we speak. Guide, pilot and ship are at your disposal. At a price naturally.’

‘A scuffling big price,’ Ronick growled.

Finbar grinned. 'The Doctor's bound to be good for it. Am I right Doctor?'

'I don't normally carry cash I'm afraid,' the Doctor said. 'Apart from jelly babies, which I usually trade for, I don't have much use for it.'

'You could buy me ten times over with what that girl of yours would get for one fight.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'We have no immediate plans for a big money fight; he said and wondered why he was bothering to tell this young man technical truths.'

'You're a man of your word,' Finbar said. 'I know you'll pay me.'

The Doctor looked at Ronick and at Sita. 'It appears this is to be my treat,' he said. 'So what do you want to do?'

'As long as you're paying,' Ronick said. 'I always fancied a trip to the high deep.'

'There has to be an end to all this,' Sita said. 'Reefer's the key. Find him and it all falls into place. I badly want it all to fall into place. I want to know who it is I'm going to...' She paused as though searching for the precise word and then said finally, 'punish.'

Find him, the Doctor thought, and it all falls into place? How likely is that? Again: could one not-very-well-known duellist really be what all this was about? And when had that theory stopped being thin and become the only possible explanation? Movement instead of action, is that what was happening?

'We have to move,' Finbar said, 'if you're going to do this.'

The Doctor got to his feet. For the moment he couldn't think of an alternative course of action. Movement was all that was left. 'Is it far?' he asked.

'Pretty far,' Finbar said. 'But it is getting closer all the time.'

'I was talking about the ship,' the Doctor said.

Finbar gestured them to follow him. 'So was I,' he said.

Once Keefer had decided on his new strategy it was a lot easier to avoid pointless fights with hakai-warriors. The Fat Boys were not tasked to protect the flight deck and he was

not wandering about looking for an unidentified hiding place that could be changing as he searched. The flight deck stayed put and nobody saw any reason to hide it. To make it easier still the flight crew of the *Ultraviolet Explorer* wore smart, pseudo-military uniforms when they were on duty and went about their business with a brisk formality. Obviously the Lady Hakai liked the appearance of a tight ship to be maintained.

He followed a uniform to the flight deck and stood in the shadow of a bulkhead to watch the security procedure for entering and leaving. After several members of the flight crew had come and gone through the automatic airlock he concluded that there was no security procedure. There was no print reader, no iris scanner, not even a basic keypad and a couple of surveillance cameras. The richest woman in the known worlds, with her own fanatical warrior cult to protect her, and the control centre for her space palace is left accessible to any passing chancer who happens to have got on board. Keefer was not sure that made any sense. Maybe there was something he'd missed.

Just to be on the safe side, he withdrew into a side companionway so that he was out of the immediate line of sight of the entrance. As he waited for a member of the crew to come within reach it suddenly struck him that he was definitely losing his edge. Maybe there was something he'd missed? What was he thinking of? Just to be on the safe side he was waiting to kidnap a crew member and use him to get past some hypothetical security system? When had he started to think like that? He checked the handgun: there were four shots left. He tucked it in his belt. He hefted the short sabre: loosening his arm and wrist. Enough of this nonsense, he thought. It was time to take over the flight deck and flush out his enemy. Impatient with himself he stepped out into the main corridor and strode unhesitatingly towards the flight deck.

* * *

Leela hesitated. She had managed to get the breathing suit off the dead pilot but it was damaged. She could see no way

to fix the break in the joint between the body-covering and the helmet, and although she thought she had identified the small containers of air used to fill up the helmet she could not think of a way they could be of help to her by themselves. The breathing suit would be cumbersome to wear and difficult to move in and it would leak air, so the chances were it would be more trouble than it was worth. And it would have to be worth quite a lot to persuade her to put it on anyway. When the pilot had died his body, as usually happens, had voided itself of waste matter. The suit was in a disgusting mess. Only in an emergency would she have considered wearing it and even then the emergency would have to have been immediate and severe. Of course this *was* an immediate and severe emergency.

She left the body and the soiled and broken breathing suit and went to the feeding station dispenser at the other end of the cell. She helped herself to some food tablets and some of the brackish- tasting recycled water. The pilot had thought she would be shocked to be told that they were drinking their own urine and she had enjoyed spoiling his fun by not being. She glanced across at his narrow body, abruptly aged and shrunk by death, and thought how petty and pointless their sparring had been as it turned out.

She munched on the tablets. The choices she could see were limited and not what she would have chosen given a choice. Her best chance was to stay where she was: but there was no one controlling the speeder yacht; the food tablets and the water were bound to run out sooner or later; sharing a small space with a decomposing body would be very unpleasant; and she was probably going to die no matter what. Her other choice was to open the airlock: but there was no one controlling the speeder yacht; the food tablets and the water were bound to run out sooner or later; and she was probably going to die no matter what, only more quickly that way.

Her choices came down to: sit and wait and die or get up and do something and die. She had been thinking about this

for too long, she decided. She took a final drink and headed for the airlock.

As she lay in the cramped chamber and pressed the switches in the order the control panel indicated she remembered someone saying - was it her trainer, or her father perhaps - *someone* saying: never hurry to death; you might want to change your mind before you get there. Too late she thought as she pressed the final switch and the air pump whispered into life.

Keefer held the short sabre low against his side and ducked through the automatic doors before they were fully open. As he stepped out onto the wide, circular flight deck he drew the handgun and raised the sabre slightly so that it was obvious and threatening. He paused without stopping, seeing without looking, waiting for a cue to action: a flicker of movement, the leading edge of a sound, the first taste of a smell. There was nothing. He stopped and looked around him in disbelief. There was nobody there. The flight deck was completely deserted. The back brace leaners were empty. In front of them the neat arrays of primary control boards and main system read-outs flickered and muttered unattended as though the giant ship was routinely making conversation, unaware that no one was paying any attention to it. Above the main level a second level gallery ran round the edge of the deck. It too was deserted.

It looked like a big, elaborate set-up to Keefer; not one designed to be programmed and left to get on with it. Either these people were lax to the point of negligence or something else was going on. He tucked the gun back in his belt. His plan had been to threaten the safety of the ship by taking over the flight deck and forcing its working crew to do what he wanted. Without the crew he needed to find some more direct leverage and he needed to find it quickly. He went to look at the nearest control console. It would take time to work out exactly what he could damage to get everyone's attention without actually killing himself. It was time he probably didn't have. Jerro always said you could get it done

without ever doing it just so long as they thought you could and were about to. He had been drunk at the time but even drunk Jerro always knew what he was talking about. Ideally what he needed was a damage alarm. Speculatively he flicked a couple of switches. Two of the read-out screens put up new data streams but apart from that nothing changed. Looking for some more distinctive switches he checked another console.

Behind him a voice said, 'You reached this point with gratifying skill and determination. They even lost track of you there for a while.'

Keefer raised the short sabre to distract attention from his move to take the gun from his belt with his other hand and cock it as he turned to face the speaker. How had he missed them coming onto the deck? He kept his movements slow and turned deliberately slowly to avoid pushing whoever it was into immediate action.

'They underestimated you,' the voice said, sounding relaxed and confident.

So far, Keefer felt, he was coming a poor second in this fight and his chances of pulling it back depended on the next move. Almost belatedly he was filled again by the icy elation of combat. He knew his opponent was standing still and too far away for the sabre or anything like it so they must have a gun of some sort and his only option was to outshoot them. Keep turning slowly, listening for the target, feeling for the target, aiming for the target and hitting the target before you raise the gun...

'Before you do anything rash,' his opponent said. 'You should know that you are not threatened by a weapon.'

...raising the gun, hitting the target.

'And that you are not threatened by a human being.'

Keefer finished the turn and lowered the gun. There was no doubt in his mind that the man standing by the partially open doors was telling the truth. There had been no sound, no smell, no natural link between them. Shooting him would be a pointless waste of ammunition. 'You're an android,' he

said. That was how I missed you.’ As always the elation had turned to chilly nausea.

‘Your senses are finely tuned,’ the android said.

They used to be, Keefer thought. There was a time when I wouldn’t have missed the doors opening.

The android said, ‘You assumed they worked only one way and at one speed.’ It pointed a remote controller at the doors and the narrow gap through which it had come crept closed almost silently and almost without disturbing the air. ‘You were tuned for what you expected.’

Keefer realised the thing had caught his look and interpreted it correctly. That was a dangerous talent. That was a dangerous fighter’s talent. ‘Are you able to kill?’ he asked.

‘Unable to die,’ the android said. ‘Unlike you.’

‘Is that a threat?’

‘It is a fact.’

Keefer said, ‘That depends on how you define die. I’ve destroyed one of your kind already.’

‘It did not die since it was not alive,’ the android said.

‘Where is she?’ Keefer demanded, knowing he had lost the initiative and it was unlikely that the Lady Hakai would show herself now.

‘She?’ the android asked. ‘To which she do you refer?’

‘You know everything else,’ Keefer said, ‘you must know why I’m here. Who I’m here to see.’

The android remained calm and expressionless. ‘You are here to confront the Lady Hakai. No one is allowed to confront the Lady Hakai.’

‘No one?’ Keefer said. ‘Not ever?’ When the android didn’t answer he smiled and tapped a control console with the tip of the sabre. ‘I can destroy all this you know. If I’m going to die I might as well take her and the rest of you with me. What do you say to that?’

The android did not smile. ‘That will not happen,’ it said.

Maybe it couldn’t smile, Keefer thought. Or maybe it could but never did. Perhaps it always remained expressionless no matter what happened. That was a dangerous talent. It was a

dangerous fighter who never gave anything away. But were all androids fighters? He didn't know enough about androids. How would you find out about androids? He'd only come across two and he'd... what was it he had done about it... bounced a runner on it that was it... and what had Jerro said about that... what was it you said Jerro... where was Jerro when he needed him? 'Jerro?' he asked.

The android remained silent and unmoving. Keefer dropped the sabre and the gun and heard them clatter onto the deck at his feet. There was something wrong. He tried to discipline himself. A moment's concentration on each sense. A moment on sight alone; a moment on hearing alone... a moment on hearing alone hearing, touch, taste, smell sight...

It was just before he lost consciousness that Keefer realised he had been overcome by anaesthetic gas and the android was moving towards him now. He realised that the android was not affected by the gas and his last thought before his consciousness fell apart was that it was a dangerous talent...

Chapter Fifteen

The Doctor was not comfortable.

The seat he was in was small even though it was designed to contain him rather than support him. He had checked the so-called equipment lockers and found they contained very little in the way of useful equipment. The whole ship was a lot cruder and more cramped than it had appeared on the docking bay viewscreen. Of course it was not the first time that he had come across the bigger on the outside than on the inside concept. It was, after all, the basis of every sales pitch and advertising campaign on every world he had ever visited that had such things. The outside always promised more than the inside delivered.

At times like this he did miss the TARDIS. Bigger on the inside than on the outside was a basically modest approach and so much more civilised in his considered opinion. And he didn't enjoy not being in control under any circumstances, but if you were not going to be in control it was much better not to be in control of something reasonably comfortable with plenty of room to move about; something that didn't smell quite this bad.

'I'm sorry I didn't get the chance to get a full ship purge and flush through,' Finbar was saying. 'But if we're to make the rendezvous we have to kick on.'

'Nice to know there's a reason for this stink,' Sita said, 'other than a lifestyle choice or a long-dead crew member.'

'It's the smell of space travel,' Finbar said cheerfully. 'You get used to it.'

'I don't want to get used to it,' she said. 'Personally I could have waited the extra few hours for the clean-up.'

Finbar said, 'Not really. We're shaving the one-point as it is. Any more delay and we'd have missed a full rotation.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' Ronick said.

Finbar grinned. 'It means if there's a god you're on good terms with, now's the time for a word.'

The Doctor had found some passenger information displays while they were waiting for the docking bay formalities to be completed and had taken hard copies. To pass the time since they set out he had been studying these and watching Finbar work. His guess was that they must be approaching the first navigation point, where ships that had left the OTS were allocated a space- time location from which they took over responsibility for their own onward progress. Logic, experience and reading between the lines, put together with Finbar's air of suppressed excitement, suggested to the Doctor that probably the highest risk of catastrophic accident on these trips would be at the first navigation point. 'It seems,' he said, 'the Hakai Orbital Transfer Station take no responsibility for what happens once the first navigation point, presumably the one-point in pilot's jargon, is passed. And unless you're accurate to the nanosecond they don't take responsibility for what happens before you get to it either. I imagine all this translates as: you're on your own, good luck and I hope you've got a good pilot.'

'You have got a good pilot,' Finbar said. 'The nav programme is top of the range,' he flicked a switch, 'and is laid in,' he peered at the screen read-out, 'and we'll have full main engine burn in twenty.'

'And if we don't?' Ronick was clearly not enjoying the ride.

'Pray we've picked a quiet time on the rotation,' Finbar said. 'Light traffic is what we could do with.'

'What is the rate of collision?' the Doctor asked.

'About twice what they say it is,' Finbar said.

'Collisions?' Ronick grunted. 'No one mentioned collisions.'

'Not worth worrying about.' Finbar appeared to be enjoying his discomfort. 'You'll be dead before you hear your ears explode.'

The Doctor could see the countdown reading out in front of Finbar. He wondered if top of the range meant that he actually had little or nothing to do as a pilot. In which case

he was really only functioning as a guide. If that's what he was: the Doctor was beginning to have his doubts...

'And we are out of here,' Finbar intoned, 'in three, two, one, we have burn, we have full acceleration.'

The Doctor felt the soft vibration whispering through everything. He didn't find the sensation reassuring. This was a primitive and fundamentally dangerous vehicle, he thought, unsound in principle and presumably unreliable in operation. For the umpteenth time since he and Leela had stumbled into this society he found himself regretting that he had allowed them to become more involved in it. This was all a minor matter, involving a minor aspect of an unimportant civilisation that was going nowhere and that was beginning to bore him. It seemed almost ungrateful, when they treated him as a celebrity, but all he could think was that they needed to get out of here.

'And we are on our way at last,' Finbar declared. 'Melly Finbar is the name and first rate piloting is the game. Feel free to recommend me to your friends.' He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. 'Usual offices are as previously described but should be marginally more comfortable with pseudo-grav on line. You will be living on concentrates and water but it won't be for long.'

'I've done a rough calculation,' the Doctor said. It was in fact a wild guess but that was technically a rough calculation and he wanted to sound authoritative to this cocky young man. There was something about Melly Finbar's confidence he didn't entirely trust. 'To get to the nearest habitable planet, apart from the one we recently left, would take a very long time indeed.'

'Did I say we were headed for a planet?'

'You didn't say where we were headed,' Sita said. 'You've ducked the specifics every time.'

Finbar shrugged. 'Commercially sensitive information. If I told you where your man was you could have hired anybody to get you there. I've lost work that way before.'

'Consider this commercially sensitive information,' Ronick said, his voice menacingly soft. 'Unless you stop scuffling us

about I guarantee you will be alive to hear your ears explode. What you won't hear is yourself screaming but don't let that fool you. You will be screaming.'

Finbar looked singularly unimpressed. 'Ooh scary,' he said. 'I've gone all shivery.' He snorted with derision. 'How stupid do you think I am?'

'Are you looking for specifics or will a general assessment do?' Sita asked. 'You do know who and what you're dealing with here, don't you? You haven't mistaken any of us for tourists.' She smiled coldly. 'That would be a bad mistake to make.'

'Fatal,' Ronick said, his voice still quiet and threatening.

'Difficult to learn anything from a fatal mistake,' Sita said and glanced at the Doctor as though expecting him to join in on what he already felt was a rather tired routine.

Finbar obviously felt the same. He yawned. 'And which one of you three non-tourists is planning to fly this thing, assuming chubby here can handle himself in pseudo-grav, which I doubt?' He waited briefly. 'That's what I thought.'

'Chubby?' Ronick growled. He pushed himself out of his seat. 'You're making one fatal mistake after another, aren't you boy?' He reached towards Finbar, who easily avoided the half-hearted lunge, and he subsided again almost immediately.

It seemed indeed that he couldn't handle himself in pseudo-grav, the Doctor thought and said matter-of-factly, 'Strictly speaking you can only make one fatal mistake. Unless you believe in reincarnation.' He looked at Finbar and went on without pausing or changing his tone. 'What is the name of the ship we are going to rendezvous with?'

'It's called the *Ultraviolet Explorer*,' Finbar answered.

The Doctor saw from his expression that the pilot had spoken without thinking but he wasn't sure how much information he was still holding back. 'Do they know we're planning to intercept them on their inward leg to the OTS?' he asked, impressing himself with his confident use of guessed-at jargon.

Finbar asked, 'What makes you think they're on an inward to the Hakai?' His confidence appeared to be lessening slightly.

The Doctor indicated the control console read-outs 'Your fuel load and the rate of consumption.' He hoped it sounded as though he knew what he was talking about. 'Why are they coming in?'

Finbar shook his head. 'It's got to be something major. She hasn't left the Geewin system...' He shook his head again and shrugged. 'She hasn't ever left it as far as I know.'

The Doctor had hoped he might say more about the approaching ship and when he didn't he was at something of a loss as to how to prompt him into it. 'Never?' was the best he could come up with.

'Well, it's not built for it, is it,' Finbar said. 'The woman might own the OTS but that doesn't mean she can bring that monstrous indulgence safely into orbit in any -'

Sita interrupted him, 'You mean it's *that Ultraviolet Explorer?*' She sounded astounded.

'There is only one,' Finbar said. 'The Lady Hakai's happy hideaway.'

'Wait a minute. This lady owns the Hakai Corporation?' the Doctor asked, knowing that he'd made a mistake with the question as soon as he asked it.

'Of course she does,' Finbar said. He shot the Doctor a puzzled look. 'Where have you been?'

Yes, the Doctor thought, this is obviously someone everybody knows about. Everybody including Keefer presumably. 'I thought she might have relinquished control by now,' he said. 'Wasn't there a rumour...?'

'There are always rumours,' Finbar agreed. 'But trust me, you don't stay third richest person in the system by relinquishing control of anything.'

'She controls worlds,' Ronick said. 'Yours for instance.'

'Mine?' It was the Doctor's turn to be puzzled. 'I don't think so,' he said.

'Especially your world,' Ronick said.

‘She is a big fan apparently’ Sita said. ‘Did your friend the State Security Minister never mention it?’

‘Not that I recall,’ the Doctor said.

‘She loves the tradition of the duellist,’ Sita said. ‘She is devoted to the noble contest.’

Finbar said, ‘You know she’s got her own martial cult. They call themselves hakai-warriors. We call them the Fat Boys.’

‘What is it with you and fat people?’ Ronick demanded.

‘They’re fat: it’s part of their discipline. I’m sorry if that offends you.’ Finbar didn’t look sorry. ‘Maybe it’s to set them apart from skinny space crew. I’m just a jobbing pilot, what do I know.’

The Doctor frowned at Ronick. ‘When you say controls my world...?’

Ronick said, ‘Agents, fighters, most of the Prime Division, broadcast networks; they say she owns the Senior Umpire and controls the Court of Attack.’

‘You don’t really believe that,’ Sita scoffed. ‘The Senior Umpire and the Court of Attack?’

‘Don’t let your officer-class background do all your thinking for you,’ Ronick growled. ‘Everything’s for sale if you can afford it and she can afford it.’

The Doctor felt a small, momentary excitement, as though he almost had the puzzle sorted out in his mind. ‘We’re going to intercept her ship because,’ he smiled at Finbar, ‘according to you, that’s where Keefer has run to.’ But something vital was not there he knew, or it was in the wrong place, so it was possible that he hadn’t sorted any of it out and the hopeful excitement vanished as quickly as it had come.

‘That’s where he went all right,’ Finbar said. ‘I helped him do it. I helped him to smuggle himself on board.’

And there was the problem, the Doctor realised. Given that he had begun to think this was all about duelling; all about the tradition of the noble contest and some sort of clash of cultures between the old and the new; given all that: Keefer didn’t fit anywhere. Or he was in the wrong place. Keefer could be the cause of what was happening or he could simply

be one of the effects. Or he might have nothing to do with any of it.

‘She’s not on it though is she,’ Ronick was saying. ‘Everybody knows that ship’s just a decoy. Nobody knows where she really is. Nobody knows if she’s still alive come to that. There are gods younger than she is.’

‘I don’t suppose he said why, did he?’ the Doctor asked Finbar.

‘Why what?’

‘Why he wanted to get on board.’

‘Money he said.’

‘You didn’t believe him.’

Finbar grimaced. ‘There are easier ways.’

‘Perhaps he was ambitious,’ Sita said.

‘He gave me quite a lot more than I asked for. Didn’t seem to matter to him.’

‘Why would it?’ Ronick said. ‘If he thought he had a chance at a stack of cash you’d get a nosebleed climbing over he’s not going to be bothered about pocket change.’

‘It wasn’t money he was there for.’

‘No,’ the Doctor said. ‘Whatever this is about it’s more important than money.’

‘More important than money?’ Ronick snorted.

Finbar chortled. ‘Wherever she is I’ll bet that fighter of yours is really glad to have you as her agent isn’t she?’

With a small guilty start the Doctor was reminded that he had forgotten about Leela. Again. He had been distracted. Again. It was getting to be a habit of mind. I must set about finding her, he resolved. Wherever she is I must find her. Wherever she is? Odd choice of phrase that since he hadn’t told Finbar she was missing. One of the others must have mentioned it, he thought. I mustn’t get paranoid just because I’m on the run from the police. I mustn’t see connections where there are no connections and plots where there are no plots. I must keep an open mind. And I must find Leela. Wherever she is.

When Leela pushed open the airlock hatch she was holding her breath. She had heard the air pump stop pumping air almost as soon as it had started and she was not sure what that might mean so she held her breath as she slid out of the narrow chamber and into the larger space beyond.

Down a tight, dimly lit passageway she could see what she took to be the two sealed bulkheads the pilot had described: both now unsealed and standing open. Beyond them was what looked like the other emergency airlock he had spoken of. It was another emergency airlock. The words finally meant something to her. The airlocks were there to keep the loss of air confined to one part of the ship if anything went wrong in another. They were there only for emergencies. When she had faked unconsciousness it made the pilot afraid that something had gone wrong with her part of the ship. That was why he was wearing the breathing suit. She let out the breath she had been holding and inhaled deeply. Knowing too much about what could happen and being too careful as a result is what had got him killed.

She moved quickly along the passageway, more comfortable now with the partial weightlessness of pseudo-grav. She was satisfied that, with time and a small amount of practice, she could cope with any sort of gravity from normal to none at all. If she needed to fight in any of those conditions she was confident that she would be able to. It did not seem likely that she would need to though, which was a pity. She would have preferred to die fighting if she was going to die. As she clambered into the other emergency airlock she found herself wondering if the Doctor had any idea what had happened to her.

As she expected, the airlock opened easily with a minimum of air pumped in and a soft hiss as it was released. She pulled herself out onto the flight deck and was surprised at how small and squalid it was. The pilot had said his living conditions were worse than hers and he had not been exaggerating. Hating, sleeping, bodily waste elimination: everything was crammed into this one tiny, bad-smelling space. But if he had not exaggerated about that, he certainly

had about his part in flying the ship. From the way he had talked she had imagined there must be a complicated arrangement of controls that needed constant work and great skill to keep the ship functioning.

She looked carefully over and around the semicircular desk at which it appeared the pilot must normally sit. She searched for the arrays of buttons and switches and levers that should be there, but she could see nothing much to suggest that flying needed any attention, never mind the great skill and experience the man had claimed for himself. There were four buttons and a centrally located lever and that was all. Even the TARDIS had more controls to fiddle with than this ship had.

On a small flat screen set into the middle of the desk a central image of darkness and stars was displayed, and in two long columns on either side of that changing numbers were drifting up and down. The numbers meant nothing to her but they seemed to be altering at a steady rate: rising on one side, falling on the other. It looked routine and automatic. It looked as though the ship was working itself and behaving a lot more reliably than the TARDIS ever seemed to do.

Attached to one side of the desk - not built in, Leela could see - but added on afterwards, was a boxed surveillance screen showing a picture of the cell she had just escaped from. This box and its screen had more controls than the desk itself had. She experimented and found that there were buttons that changed the angle, the viewpoint, and how close up the picture was. There were speaking and listening devices and controls to raise and lower the sound levels of these. It confirmed to her that although he had called himself the pilot the man she had killed was more of a jailer than anything else. He had told Her that if it was not for the flying he would not be needed. He had lied. The ship was flying itself. For the first time since she had sat down to work out her chances Leela allowed herself to be optimistic about her survival. She sat in the pilot's seat and relaxed. Before long she was asleep. She was still asleep when the navigation

screen showed something bright moving across the background starscape and the ship adjusted its flight coordinates to intercept it.

Keefer woke to find himself in total darkness and it took him a moment or two to realise that he was weightless. It was logical, he thought. If you wanted to keep a prisoner helpless then weightlessness was the obvious way to do it. Like most people he did not understand how pseudo-grav worked but he knew it was a Hakai development so he presumed they had the expertise to leave areas of the *Ultraviolet Explorer* untouched by its effects.

Without light he had no real idea what sort of a box they'd got him in, but it didn't much matter any more because he'd lost. He needed to get to the Lady Hakai and confront her and he hadn't done it. All he had done was kill a few Fat Boys and walk into the sort of elementary trap that he would once have seen coming without needing to look and would have dodged without needing to think. Whatever else happened now it was over for him. He'd lost the instinct. He'd lost the edge. He'd been decoyed by a machine that looked like a man but wasn't one and he'd gone down like a stumbling amateur. There were no second chances in his profession. He was dead.

He hung in the black and let the feeling of desolation drift across him like tired dust. He was a helpless prisoner with nothing but darkness in his eyes. He had run, he had fought, he had killed, and it had all led him to this pointless place. He sighed, sucking in a deep involuntary breath. He tasted a faint mixture of stale food on the air: pancakes and vegetables, lecea seed; he smelled a distant hint of sweat and human waste, water and the scalding scent of hot metal. Somewhere close by was the recycling system. He hadn't seen a plan but recycling plants and the like were usually towards the more protected centre of these big ships and his guess was that the *Ultraviolet Explorer* was no exception. That might explain the weightlessness too. It could be that the pseudo-grav generator was somewhere near. The beginnings

of a possible counterattack began to suggest themselves. If he could find a way out of this box and sabotage the pseudo-grav he might have a whole new killing ground on which to face his opponent. He patted himself down. If they'd left him something he could throw he should be able to work out the size of his prison and what it was made of. Once he knew that, he could get on with things.

'I see what you meant,' the Doctor said. It was not the biggest ship he had ever seen anywhere but it was certainly the biggest he'd seen recently. And it was clearly not designed for close planetary orbits or intricate docking manoeuvres, no matter how large the satellite. 'Fragile and cumbersome by the look of it. There would have to be a very good reason to bring that anywhere near the OTS.'

'Gods in a runner, I heard it was big,' Ronick muttered, 'but that scuffling thing's enormous.'

'All that for one old woman?' Sita said.

'You're missing the point,' Finbar said. 'The Lady Hakai's not one old woman: she's one old woman who can have whatever she wants, whenever she wants it.'

'It must be difficult to decide what that might be,' the Doctor said and found himself wondering again how much of what was happening was actually by design.

'This is where you realise why you hired me,' Finbar said cheerfully, 'and why I don't come cheap.' He started punching instructions into the navigation computer.

Watching closely, it was apparent to the Doctor that most of what the pilot was doing was nothing more than showmanship, smoke and mirrors for the uninitiated and the gullible. The core procedure was very simple and the skill required looked to be minimal. Top of the range did seem to mean ease of operation. Before the piloting charade had been completed the main drive responded and the ship, tiny in comparison to its weirdly florid and unwieldy target, began a gracefully elliptical closing manoeuvre.

As they watched on the screens Finbar crowed, 'Would you look at that.' He continued to tap elaborate key combinations

into what the Doctor could see was an obviously locked down and non-responsive navigation program. 'That course is a thing of beauty is it not? And all it takes is a lifetime of practice.'

The Doctor smiled to himself. And two key strokes, he thought, and a coin for the metre. 'I imagine they are expecting us, aren't they,' he said.

'Expecting us?' Finbar stopped what he was doing and looked up.

'What makes you say that?' Ronick said. 'Why would you think they'd be expecting us?'

'Because he's too relaxed,' Sita said, nodding at the pilot. 'He's not worried. No concerns at all about getting us on board, so unless he thinks we can overwhelm them with our superior size and power...'

'Trust me I can dock this thing on that monstrosity without anyone noticing,' Finbar said, but the Doctor noticed he did not go back to his showy key work.

'You'd better,' Ronick growled. 'If you want to get paid.'

On the screens the two ships converged.

The two huge, more or less naked men stood on either side of Leela holding her firmly by the arms. In her short life she had fought warriors of all shapes and sizes but these were a new experience for her. Their strength she could have expected but because they were so fat she had totally underestimated their speed and agility. Too late she realised that what she had learned and practised in the various stages between normal weight and weightlessness might not be the same for other fighters. These squat, very heavy men would clearly gain more advantage from the reduced weight conditions than she had and she was annoyed with herself for not waking up to this until it was too late.

She had woken to find the small ship she was on was approaching a much larger one and she had made a hurried search of the flight deck for a weapon of some kind but she had found nothing of use. She felt vulnerable and only half-dressed going into a dangerous situation without her knife

and her combat pouch, but wasting time worrying about what she could not change would only add to the danger, she knew, so she put it from her mind. She was unarmed but she was rested and she was ready. And more important than that: she was Leela of the Sevateem, the only representative of her tribe in this place. The dead pilot had said that was why *they* wanted her. Well this was where *they* found out that ambushing her was a bad mistake and holding her captive was a worse one.

By the time the ship finished its automatic docking procedures Leela was already inside the outside airlock and when everything finally fell silent she pressed the standard key sequence and listened to the air pump's brief fluttering. She knew by the short time it ran that the hatch would open easily and she assumed this meant that there would be the same air on the other side of it.

She grasped the release bar, took a deep breath and pushed hard. As the hatch swung open she pulled herself out and dived forward. She rolled lightly onto the deck, vaulting back onto her feet and spinning round in a full circle to find and face her kidnappers. There was no one there. She was alone in what she recognised was another, much larger, airlock. She looked for the control panel. If *they* were not here then they must be on the other side of the next doorway. She found she was dizzy. She located the control panel and stepped towards it. She was dizzy. Why was she dizzy? She had practised in these conditions; she should not be dizzy. She staggered a little. Had she practised the spin? She could not quite remember practising the spin. She must have practised the spin. The spin was an obvious thing to practise. The door controls seemed to have moved further away. She reached for them. Her hand seemed to have moved further way...

When she woke up again she was facing a short, enormously fat man in a battle thong. She was still a little dizzy but there should be time enough to clear her head, she thought, because this short, enormously fat man in a battle

thong looked as though he would have trouble doing anything quickly, except eat. Then he leapt at her.

Leela stood between the two squat, fat warriors without bothering to struggle. She could not unbalance them. Any movement she made was countered not by one but by both men working together. They were well trained and disciplined. There would be a time to fight back against them but this was not it. For the moment she wanted them to think she was beaten. For the moment, in fact, she was beaten but that was just for the moment. The three of them stood in a pool of harsh light, unmoving and waiting. Leela assumed they were waiting for *them*. She tried to peer through the cone of brightness and see into the darkness beyond but it was impossible. She closed her eyes and relaxed, letting herself go limp. She felt the two men bracing slightly to hold her in position. At least they would get tired before she did and there might be some advantage in that.

‘So you are the infamous Leela,’ a woman’s voice said. ‘You are less impressive than I had imagined.’ It was an odd voice: at once harsh and at the same time light, almost musical in tone. ‘Such are the limits of tri-dee I suppose.’

Leela opened her eyes. She stared in the direction the voice seemed to be coming from. It sounded to her as though the speaker was trying to mimic someone else. The woman, if it was a woman, was invisible in the blackness. ‘Show yourself,’ she said. ‘Or are you a sneaking coward like all the others? Where are you hiding? Show yourself if you are not afraid.’

‘Turn her round slowly,’ the voice said. ‘Let me see her.’

Holding Leela firmly the two warriors shuffled in a ponderous, flat-footed circle. ‘Unimpressive,’ the voice said. ‘From any angle she is unimpressive. No threat that I can see. Disappointing. The agent must be skilful to have turned this one into a figure of note.’

‘Is this why I have been brought here?’ Leela demanded. ‘To be sneered at by someone who cowers in the darkness?’

‘Revive the other one,’ the voice ordered. ‘Bring him here. Make sure he is uninjured. The fight must be fair or it is nothing.’

Chapter Sixteen

Keefer had ripped the fastenings from his pockets and flicked pieces of them in six opposite directions trying to use the faint sound reflections to build up an image in his mind of the box he assumed he was in: its size, what it was made of, whereabouts he was in relation to the surfaces. He was just beginning to get an idea of it all when the panel that he had arbitrarily designated as the top slid back and the lights came on.

The whole exercise had been a waste of time as it turned out, but he was encouraged to see through almost closed eyes that his mental mapping had been reasonably accurate. He was being held in an empty storage silo and he had been drifting close to one end of it. He closed his eyes completely and went through his sense-sharpening preparations for combat. He smelled and heard the hakai-warriors he assumed had been sent to guard him: there were three. He smelled and heard the crewman who was operating the remote restraint clamps and he tasted the faint, metallic scent of the hydraulic drive as it snaked the forked arm with its pair of open claws towards him. He listened to the slither and creak of the device and he opened his eyes a fraction and watched as the clamps nudged closer reaching for a hold. Slowly, imperceptibly he flexed and twisted away from them. He could not see the crewman but he could tell from the sudden sharp smell of sweat and the convulsive closing and opening again of the clamps as they snatched at him, missed and drew back for another try, that he was not an expert at what he was doing and that he was very tense.

Keefer could only make out two Fat Boy guards looking in at him. Neither had drawn his sabre, preferring it seemed to use both hands to hold onto the edge of the open panel. It was already too late for them to correct that mistake, he

thought with grim satisfaction, but the third was probably armed and ready, which would almost certainly be what was making the crewman tense. A weightless Fat Boy waving a razor sharp sabre around would be enough to make anyone nervous.

As he waited unmoving Keefer worked out from smells, sounds, the angle of movement of the remote-controlled arm, exactly where the crewman and the third guard would be positioned. And he watched the remote hydraulic arm edge the clamps closer and closer until the arm itself was finally within reach. Before the clamps could close he grabbed the main arm and heaved himself into motion, propelling his body towards the opening. Instinctively the startled hakai-warriors pushed back from the edge of the panel, at the same time reaching for their sabres. Unlike Keefer they had not planned or calculated their moves. To duck back and pull their sabres both men had to release the holds that had given them a measure of control over their weightlessness. They were immediately uncoordinated and helpless in the killing zone. They did not share Keefer's natural talent for counterattack. Flapping and sabre waving was all they could manage for the moment and it was no more than a useless gesture of defiance.

Keefer flew through the open panel. A second touch and tug on the hydraulic arm altered his trajectory so that it was directly at the crewman, who was already panicking as he crouched, clutching the grab handles of the machine as if his life depended on it. As Keefer had expected, the third Fat Boy was beside him. He had his sabre drawn and he was using his free hand to brace himself against a bulkhead stanchion.

Bearing down on the crewman Keefer let out a sudden bloodcurdling whoop and then yelled at the top of his lungs, 'You're dead you little scuffler!' The shock of the sudden noise drove the man's panic to a climax and he let go of the machine and tried to dodge away. Inevitably he got into a struggling tangle with the Fat Boy. The man was flapping and kicking in a vain attempt to escape, and the hakai-warrior had to push him out of the way so that he could get a clear

strike at Keefer. The push cost him the control he needed. He had let go of the stanchion. The wild sabre slash cut the crewman almost in half. While the hakai-warrior was trying, through a cloud of blinding blood, to wrench the sabre free of the twitching body, Keefer took a firm grasp of the bulkhead stanchion with his legs and one arm and wrapped the other arm tightly round the struggling Fat Boy's throat and strangled him.

In the meantime the other two would-be guards had drifted to where they could touch firm surfaces and they were beginning to get themselves under control. Keefer extracted the sabre and launched himself from the bulkhead, pushing off hard with his legs. This trajectory blind-sided one of them and he killed him as he passed with a cut to the throat. Keefer reached the surface he was aiming for and used it to turn and kick off again. While the remaining hakai-warrior was still trying to turn towards him he severed the man's spinal cord with a cut to the base of his neck.

Blood-soaked and abruptly nauseous, Keefer pushed himself back to the control unit of the hydraulic arm. As the clammy feeling of sickness passed he set about detaching the machine from the brackets that had temporarily anchored it in position.

It had all been ridiculously easy, the Doctor thought as he strode through the passageways of the *Ultraviolet Explorer*, following the scurrying figure of Melly Finbar. They had docked, disembarked and set off to reconnoitre, and so far no one had so much as noticed them never mind challenged them. He was fairly sure he had glimpsed movement ahead at junctions in the passageways but by the time they reached them everything was deserted. Finbar would pause dramatically at such crossing points, peering this way and that before gesturing them forward. To add to the Doctor's discomfort he found that his normal stride was lengthened and made slightly haphazard by the reduced gravity. He was finding it difficult to match his pace to the smaller man, who was clearly more adept at coping with this pseudo-grav

nonsense. A little way behind, Ronick and Sita were having even more difficulty.

‘If you could have whatever you wanted,’ Ronick was grumbling, ‘why would you choose this?’

‘You can get used to anything,’ Sita said.

‘But if you’ve got more money than the gods, you don’t have to. You don’t adapt to the world, the world adapts to you.’

‘You always adapt,’ the Doctor said. ‘You may not realise it’s happening but everyone always adapts. No one person has ever been powerful enough to have any world adapt to them.’ He stopped walking. ‘Finbar?’ he called and the pilot turned. ‘I’m bored with these charades. Let’s get to the gore shall we?’

Finbar hurried back. ‘Get to the gore?’ He looked puzzled.

‘Where are you taking us?’

‘To find this Keefer character you’re looking for.’

‘And how are you doing that exactly? Extra sensory perception? Muddy footprints? A very acute sense of smell perhaps?’

‘I don’t understand.’ Finbar’s puzzled frown deepened and became even less convincing.

The Doctor smiled broadly. ‘I think you do.’ He was tempted to pat the young man on the shoulder and advise him against giving up the day job. ‘Take me to your leader.’

‘My leader?’

‘Your employer, your sponsor, your pay mistress, whatever you want to call her. The woman obviously has some reason for wanting us here so take us to her. Only without all the histrionics, there’s a good chap. They’re not really very convincing.’

‘You still don’t trust me.’ Finbar had changed his expression from puzzlement and now he was doing his best to look hurt and dignified. ‘I might as well leave you to it then.’

‘I don’t think so,’ Ronick growled and stumbled over himself to grab Finbar by the front of his coveralls.

‘I can’t think of a single reason why I should try and help someone who doesn’t trust me,’ Finbar said.

‘Yes you can.’ Ronick pulled the skinny pilot close. ‘Now do as the nice man says.’

‘Or what?’ Finbar demanded.

‘Or we’ll ask the naked fat man,’ Sita said, nodding towards the hakai-warrior who was standing at the junction of the passageways.

As they all turned to look the Fat Boy was joined by two more. They all drew their sabres.

Leela looked at the knife they had given her. It looked a lot like the knife that had been taken from her when she was captured but it was not the same. It was exactly the same size and shape, with the same hilt, but it only made it more obvious that: ‘This is not my knife,’ she said.

‘It is an improved version,’ the man with the expressionless face told her. ‘It is lighter, stronger, sharper. You will find it much better to fight with.’

Leela threw it down onto the deck. ‘I have no use for it.’

One of the squat, fat warriors retrieved the knife and offered it to her hilt first. Leela folded her arms and waited to see if her guards would grab her again and force her to stand between them as before.

‘You are a knife fighter,’ the voice from the darkness said. ‘That is the best knife you could ever have.’

‘I am a warrior,’ Leela said. ‘I am not a knife fighter.’

‘You fight with a knife.’

‘I fight with my knife. That is not my knife.’

‘If you would prefer another weapon you have only to say what,’ the voice said. ‘I want a good contest, nothing more.’

Leela thought she had more or less located whereabouts the voice was coming from. The position was directly in front of her but higher up, as though the person speaking was on a raised platform. She peered into the darkness, hoping to see some movement that would confirm her guess. ‘What will you be using?’ she asked, taking the proffered knife and hefting it in her hands.

‘Don’t be insolent.’

‘I am not being insolent’ Leela said flatly. ‘I am offering you a duel.’ She tried to remember the exact form of words that were supposed to be used for a challenge. What was it that security man she had not killed had said to the Doctor? Yes, that was it. ‘I am declaring a spot challenge. I name and claim the ground. Right here, right now.’

‘Ridiculous creature,’ the voice said icily. ‘You do not presume to challenge me.’

Leela was sure she saw some alteration, some flicker in the blackness beyond the cone of blinding light. ‘Yes I do,’ she said and flipped the knife over in her hand and threw it at the movement. The knife vanished from her sight and there was a grunt of pain. Around Leela warriors reacted, drawing their sabres and starting towards her from out of the darkness.

‘Stop!’ The woman’s voice was shrill and commanding. ‘Do not touch her!’ The warriors froze in mid-lunge and lowered their sabres.

The harsh cone of light that had isolated Leela lifted and spread, and for the first time she could see her surroundings. She was bewildered. She was standing in the same Court of Attack where she and the Doctor had faced the High Referee. It was the same semi-circular chamber under a lofty, opaque-glass half dome. The only differences were that in the tall-backed centre seat of the elevated curved tier of nine seats, instead of the High Referee, there was a thin, plainly dressed young woman. She was flanked on either side, not by the Panel of Fight Replay but by fat half-naked warriors. One of the seats was empty and a warrior lay dead in front of her. Leela could see that her throw had been accurate and only the rapid reflexes and willing sacrifice of her bodyguard had saved the woman from the knife.

‘Impressive,’ the woman said. ‘Perhaps I underestimated you.’

‘How long was I asleep?’ Leela asked.

The man with the expressionless face, who had not moved at all during the brief flurry of action, said, ‘A short time only.’

Leela gestured around. 'Then this is a copy of the other place.'

'It is a duplicate.'

'Why?'

'That is not a question for you to ask,' the man said.

Leela scowled at him. 'There are no questions that are not for me to ask. If a question can be thought of then it can be asked.' She strode forward and glared up at the woman. 'What is this for?'

'It amuses me,' the woman said. Two squat warriors were struggling to remove the bulky body, manoeuvring it with difficulty along the narrow tier. She paid them no attention at all.

'Who are you?' Leela demanded.

The woman ignored the question. She stared into the middle distance. 'I am waiting,' she remarked to no one in particular, and the man with the expressionless face hurried towards the door in the flat wall at the back of the semi-circular copy courtroom.

As she turned and watched him go Leela was struck by his speed and grace. There was no wasted energy in his actions. He moved perfectly and precisely and there was something not quite human about it. But before Leela could think any more about what she was seeing, the man had disappeared through the doorway to be replaced by a familiar figure who had come striding in looking as though this was all familiar and expected. 'Doctor,' she exclaimed.

'Ah, there you are,' the Doctor said and beamed at her.

Resisting the urge to rush over and embrace him, Leela said, 'What are you doing here?' and thought even as she said it that it was a silly question.

'That would be a silly question,' the Doctor said, 'but for the fact that I don't know.' He looked up at the woman in the High Referee's chair. 'I think I'm here because you sent for me. You are the Lady Hakai I assume?'

'I am Hakai,' she said.

'You have been interfering in my life,' the Doctor said. 'And the life of my young companion. Normally I would require an

apology but I'm prepared to overlook it this time. Leela? Shall we go?' He turned towards the doorway, which was immediately blocked by sabre-wielding hakai-warriors.

'You are here,' the woman said, 'to negotiate formal terms for the duel between your fighter and a fighter I control.'

'I negotiate with you?'

Yes.'

'Are you a member in good standing of the Guild of Agents? Only I am a member you see and our policy is to discourage freelance operations. Are you freelance?'

There was a pause. 'What do you want for your fighter?'

'What are you offering?'

The woman sighed. Sounding bored she said, 'Whatever you wish. You have only to name it.'

'The voice and the hands and the mind. It's difficult to pretend they are young when they're not, isn't it?' the Doctor said amiably.

'What are you offering again?'

'Name it.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Not enough,' he said. 'It's been a pleasure doing business with you but I'm afraid we just can't agree. Fight's off. Perhaps another day, who knows?' He gestured towards the doorway. 'Leela? Shall we go?'

Once it was free of its brackets Keefer had no problem moving the machine in a reasonably controlled way and he took it with him as he went looking for the pseudo-grav generator.

He thought about hiding the corpses in the storage silo where he had been held but decided it was not worth the bother. It would take whoever they sent to check less time to find the dead hakai-warriors and the bits of crewman than it would have taken him to hide them in the first place.

Pulling from handhold to push point, with the machine behind or out in front of him, he searched the weightless utility zone for something that might possibly be the generator. Following scents and sounds he found the recycling system easily but the difficult thing about the

pseudo-grav unit was that he had no idea what it might smell, sound or even look like. Somehow he doubted that it would have an identifying plate attached to it and form would not follow function, it wouldn't look like what it did, because he didn't know what it did. He knew the effect of what it did but that wasn't the same thing.

So what to do? Pick a unit at random? Use a process of elimination and pick a unit he didn't recognise as something else? His plan had been to use the machine to damage the pseudo-grav generator but as things were going he'd probably end up just blocking the scuffling drains. He floated motionless at the edge of the ship's utility zone, looking at the haphazard maze of unattended machines while he tried to reason his way through the problem. He found himself wondering what Jerro would do.

Behind him the android said, 'The Lady Hakai waits to see you.'

Never be too proud to ask kid, the memory of Jerro Fanson murmured in his mind. You'd be amazed what they'll tell you if they can't think of a reason not to.

Without turning round Keefer said, 'Pseudo-grav generator: which one is it?'

Ronick shouldered his way through the hakai-warriors who were still guarding the doorway and shambled and stumbled his way into the chamber followed by Sita. Finbar, looking slightly crestfallen, brought up the rear.

'How come you get preferential treatment?' Ronick asked the Doctor. 'What have you got that we haven't?'

The Doctor smiled his most wolfish smile. 'Modesty forbids,' he said.

'I'm serious,' Ronick said.

'I haven't named my price yet.'

Ronick's eyes narrowed and almost disappeared. 'And that's why we've been standing around out there?'

'No, that's why you'll be standing around in here,' the Doctor said.

‘Is that her?’ Sita did not look directly up at the woman in the high-backed chair. She was obviously awestruck. ‘Is that the Lady Hakai?’

Strangely predictable, the Doctor thought, that what Ronick called an officer-class type should be the most impressed by the wealth and power of this superficially young-looking old woman. ‘That is Hakai,’ the Doctor said. ‘She’s my new best friend. She wants me to have whatever my hearts desire.’

‘And that’s Leela,’ Ronick said, noticing her for the first time. She was standing with her arms folded, glaring up at the woman who was not deigning even to acknowledge her existence.

‘She and Hakai haven’t really hit it off, I’m afraid,’ the Doctor confided cheerfully. ‘Leela did try to kill her of course, which may have soured their relationship slightly. People can be very touchy about these things I find.’

‘Is this about a duel?’ Sita said. ‘Has she been brought here to fight?’

The Doctor nodded. ‘To fight Keefer, that’s my guess. I’m here to negotiate terms it seems. Underneath that viciously youthful exterior, Hakai is a just sweet old-fashioned traditionalist.’

‘Well I’m not,’ Ronick growled. ‘And that’s not what I’m doing here.’

‘I know,’ the Doctor said. ‘We both know what you’re doing here, don’t we.’

‘So where is he?’ Sita asked. ‘I’ve come a long way to find this Keefer character.’

Ronick stepped forward to confront the Doctor. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ His eyes were wide open and glaring.

Before the Doctor could answer him the pseudo-grav generator abruptly stopped functioning and weightlessness hit. The immediate effect was most obvious on people and things that were in motion but everyone, even the most firmly seated, was aware at once that there was something odd happening.

Ronick's steps pushed him up into the air and left him clutching desperately at the Doctor for control. Sita found herself grabbing at the Doctor's coat. The three of them floated away in a hapless, helpless cluster. To one side of the doorway Finbar snatched for a handhold. All around hakai-warriors left the deck and drifted about like plump flightless birds in an irresistible updraft.

Hours of practice in her cell on the speeder yacht made Leela's response fast and virtually instinctive. She kicked herself off and flew upwards, aiming for the woman in the high-backed chair. Startled, Hakai pulled the two handguns from the chair's ornamental holsters and fired them at her. The reaction to the cartridges' small explosive charges made it impossible to hold the handguns firmly and they flew backwards and sideways in the woman's grasp. One of the shots killed a floating hakai-warrior and the other smashed a hole in the opaque glass dome and shorted out the artificial lighting rig. Leela's leap had now carried her almost to the level of the seating tier and she was ducking away from the desperate sabre slashes of the seated bodyguards and reaching towards Hakai, who was trying to bring her handguns to bear again.

And then everything changed once more when the pseudo-grav abruptly came back on.

The android had been tasked to bring him to its mistress. It had seemed to Keefer that the instruction must include not hurting him since the thing was reluctant to manhandle him in any way despite being physically stronger than he was. Perhaps the dead Fat Boys and the chopped up crewman had similar instructions he had thought. Perhaps they were all sacrificed to keep him alive and in one piece. But why would that be? It made no sense. Why send an android to kill him and then send another with instructions not to hurt him? He had shaken off the thought. Now was not the time for questions, now was the time to give himself a fighting chance.

The android was a powerful machine and subtle in its operation but lying and the possibility of being lied to did not seem to be part of its understanding. In its efforts to reason him into following directions to where it said the Lady Hakai was waiting, the thing had been quite prepared to show him the pseudo-grav generator. He had told it that his life's ambition was to see one up close and that he would follow whatever instructions he was given as soon as he had. He also told it that, as part of his culture and religion, he was required to take trophies from winning fights and hold them briefly and that was why he was keeping close to him, for a sacred period, the machine he had taken from the dead crewman.

All this nonsense had been accepted without question and when Keefer thrust his trophy into the guts of the generator the android had seemed genuinely surprised by what had happened. He had left it trying to remove the obstruction and repair the damage.

By the time Keefer reached the mock courtroom it was, as he expected, in chaos. What he did not expect was the strange group of people involved in the general mayhem. As well as the Fat Boys flapping around, there was a weirdly dressed, curly-haired man who seemed to be wrestling with a slim woman and an angry fat man. He recognised the figure of Melly Finbar clinging to a light fitting and wondered fleetingly what he was doing there. Most unexpected though was the girl in the animal skin tunic, who was flying at the Lady Hakai. Shots from the woman's ceremonial handguns tore into a Fat Boy and the ornamental glass dome. Keefer watched as the girl skilfully dodged the Fat Boys and reached for the Lady Hakai.

And then everything changed once more when the pseudo-grav abruptly came back on.

The Doctor, Sita and Ronick collapsed to the deck in an untidy heap. As the Doctor extricated himself he was relieved to see Leela back on the deck as well. He didn't know what she had been planning to do if she had got her hands on

Hakai and he was fairly sure she didn't know either. It looked as though she might be planning another try, however, and all around in the half-lit confusion he could see hakai-warriors picking themselves up, alert for danger and ready for orders. Hakai had only to give the word, he thought, and Leela would be sliced and diced.

He looked up at the woman, who was still sitting in the high backed chair, still brandishing the two handguns. It occurred to him that if she chose to start firing now the shots would be a lot more accurate. It was definitely time to get themselves back to Finbar's ship and leave. Where was Finbar? He glanced around and that was when he noticed the young man armed with a hakai-warrior's short sabre. He was moving to thwart Leela's pending attack. For a moment the Doctor thought he was a crewman but then he simply put a restraining hand on Leela's arm and glared up at Hakai.

'Why did you pay to have me dead?' he demanded. 'What was the reason?'

To the Doctor's surprise the woman smiled benignly down at him. 'I want to see you fight,' she said. It was a statement of fact, not a request or an explanation, the Doctor realised. She did not think of the young man as being the same as her in any way at all. It was like listening to a very young child talking to a toy. 'I want to see you fight her.'

'Why did you send an android to kill me?'

So that was it, the Doctor thought. This is Keefer and that was what brought him and them here.

'You do not ask me questions.'

'It's Keefer,' Sita whispered. That must be Keefer.'

'Of course it scuffling Keefer,' Ronick muttered.

'I don't fight for your personal amusement,' Keefer declared. 'Why did you want me dead?'

More to the point, the Doctor thought, why doesn't she just give the word to have you killed now?

The woman waved the pistols. 'You refuse a challenge. You know the penalty for that.'

'It is you who have refused a challenge,' Leela shouted.

There is no challenge,' the Doctor said loudly and firmly. 'There has been no challenge.'

'Keep silent. This is not your business.' The command was dismissive.

'Of course it's my business. I'm the Guild-registered agent for these fighters. Leela and Keefer are both clients of mine. You, as it turns out, are merely a wealthy fan.'

The woman pointed both pistols in the Doctor's direction. He had her attention, he could see, but not her full attention as yet. 'Get ready to head back to ship,' he murmured at Sita and Ronick as he walked forward to stand between Leela and Keefer. 'Not that I have anything against wealthy fans,' he said loudly. 'But it does fundamentally alter our relationship.'

'You imagine we have a relationship?'

The Doctor pointedly ignored the withering comment. 'Our negotiations must now be in private,' he went on imperturbably. 'You may be wealthy but rules are rules, I'm afraid.' He turned to Keefer. 'If you and Leela would like to go with my associates.' He nodded towards Sita and Ronick. 'Now if you don't mind. You cannot be present while I discuss the arrangements for this private match.' He smiled encouragingly at Leela. 'Leave this to me. Please.'

Leela hesitated. The Doctor was almost sure she was going to be her usual uncooperative self but then she turned and strode across the deck to where Sita and Ronick were waiting. 'I don't know who you are,' Keefer said quietly, 'but Jerro Fanson's my agent.'

'He sent me after you,' the Doctor said. 'Don't make me regret doing this for him.'

Keefer hesitated and then he too strode across the deck and joined the others and they all headed for the doorway.

'Wait,' Hakai commanded.

Hakai-warriors moved to block the doorway.

The Doctor smiled up at her. 'I have explained the situation but if you want me to go over it again more slowly... with shorter words perhaps?' He paused to see if the insult would penetrate the woman's arrogance and when it didn't he said, 'We could go to your private quarters if you'd prefer. I can

understand your embarrassment at having to admit your ignorance of the rules in front of your friends.’ Still the woman sat unmoving and he realised that she hadn’t been listening to him. It appeared she was thinking, and, the Doctor thought, it appeared she was slow of thinking.

In the doorway Ronick tried to bull his way through the hakai-warriors but made no progress. Frustrated he turned round and noticed Finbar in the shadows. ‘What are you skulking there for?’ he demanded.

Hakai finally stirred and gestured for the doorway to be cleared.

As the group moved on through, Ronick snarled at Finbar, ‘Get yourself over here. You’re with us.’

Finbar hung back. ‘I’m in this for the money,’ he said. ‘Nothing else.’

Ronick moved towards him menacingly. ‘You’ve been paid.’

‘Not enough. Not enough for what I’ve done.’

‘Who is that?’ Hakai asked of no one in particular.

‘I’m the pilot,’ Finbar shouted. ‘I’m the one who brought them to you.’

Hakai fired both handguns and went on firing. Even the hakai-warriors were ducking for cover but the shots were much more accurate, as the Doctor had thought they would be. ‘Run!’ he shouted and set off after the others as they rushed out through the doorway. The Doctor reached Finbar, caught him as he fell and bundled the skinny young man out into the corridor where the others were waiting. Finbar had been hit three times and was already dead.

‘We’re scuffed,’ Ronick said. ‘What do we do for a pilot?’

A fusillade of shots spattered into the corridor. ‘I shouldn’t worry about it,’ the Doctor said and smiled his best smile. ‘If we get to the ship in one piece it’ll be a major achievement.’ He could see immediately that his attempt at humour was about to misfire when Leela and Keefer both tensed and turned, clearly ready for a last ditch battle. ‘Come on, come on,’ he said, setting off down the corridor. ‘Stop hanging about. Miles to go and promises to keep.’

He did not look back as he strode away. If he looked back it would give them a chance to hesitate, to question the action; this way there was no room for doubt about what they should be doing. Of course he was going to look pretty silly if they weren't following him...

Chapter Seventeen

They reached the ship without serious challenge, and with everyone on board the Doctor put his theory about top-of-the-range navigation programs to the test. As he expected it was a simple enough matter to instruct the system to recalibrate, reset and return to base, after which the ship functioned automatically. He had been vaguely tempted to make it look more complicated than it was and pretend to be concentrating constantly. That would have given him the chance to think rather than answer questions he wasn't ready to answer, or ask questions that other people weren't ready to answer. But in the event there seemed to be nothing else for it.

'What did you mean we both know why I'm here?' Ronick asked in a lull in the conversation that followed the introductions and general explanations.

'The price on our heads,' the Doctor said, aware that he was back in the area of the technically true. 'That is what you told me isn't it.'

'It sounded like an accusation.'

The Doctor shrugged. That's because it was an accusation, he thought, and said, 'What did you mean when you said Finbar had been paid?'

'Did I say that?'

'You said that,' the Doctor said, and thought, that sounded like an evasion and...

'You'd agreed to pay him, that's what I meant,' Ronick said. ...and that is because it was an evasion. 'I see.'

'Doctor?' Leela had been rummaging around in the small equipment lockers and was holding her knife and the carrying pouch she used. She looked by turns puzzled and delighted. 'Did you know these were here?'

‘No,’ he said. ‘I didn’t.’ More puzzlingly he knew that they hadn’t been there when they had chartered the ship and its cocky young pilot and left the Hakai Orbital Transfer Station.

They got back to the OTS to find rumours about the approach of the fabled *Ultraviolet Express* were already dominating the news. When he set about booking the return flights to the planet’s surface the Doctor found that his VIP status was still intact and there still seemed to be no sign of arrest warrants for him or for Sita Benovides.

He thought he noticed a new interest from people though. It seemed to be different, more guarded somehow. He even noticed some casual bystanders actually moving to try and avoid getting too close. Perhaps their motley little group appeared threatening. Perhaps Leela’s fame had continued to grow in her absence and she was now so huge that everyone was overawed. Perhaps he really was getting paranoid.

He tried smiling and nodding at someone waiting nearby. ‘Has anyone any idea what this Hakai woman is up to?’ he asked, conversationally. ‘Any theories? What do you think?’

The man looked surprised and then slightly embarrassed. ‘I think it’s time for a change,’ he said. ‘People break the law, the police should handle it. I think the whole Court of Attack thing is...’

‘Barbarous?’ the Doctor suggested, pleased to find someone who agreed with his opinions. ‘That’s exactly how I feel.’

‘I can understand that,’ the man said. ‘And I wish you and the others the best of luck I really do.’

‘Thank you, I appreciate it,’ the Doctor said as he watched the man’s hasty efforts to manoeuvre himself away from the immediate vicinity. Weightlessness was a disorientating environment, but was that all it was? he wondered. Something peculiar was going on.

The first attack came as they were walking through the concourse at Aerospace Main. While the return to full gravity had slowed them all up, in the case of Ronick and Sita it had caused giddiness and nausea as well. The Doctor himself was

slightly discomfited, though he wasn't about to admit it but Ronick had no such inhibitions. 'I'm going to spew,' he groaned and stopped abruptly. The others stumbled to a pause, uncertain whether to help or dodge. It was this that saved Leela and Keefer. The shots were meant for them but they missed and the noise of the long guns, echoing through the cavernous space, sent everyone in the concourse ducking for cover. Wordlessly Leela and Keefer moved to flank the shooters.

The Doctor watched the two young fighters working as a team, zigzagging across the open spaces, distracting their opponents and narrowing the distance inexorably. They were closing for the kill, he realised. The thought was a mixture of resignation, dismay and, if he was honest, a sort of admiration.

'Get down, Doctor!' Sita shouted.

Too late the Doctor noticed that one of the shooters had targeted him. He froze. He thought he saw the muzzle flash as the gun fired and then something hit him and knocked him to the ground. He thought he heard a bullet sting past above him. He was winded and struggling for a breath.

'Which part of get down did you not understand?' Ronick said rolling off him. 'You're lucky I don't vomit all over you, you stupid scuffler.'

The Doctor took a deep breath. 'That was quick,' he gasped.

'If you say: for a fat man, I *will* vomit all over you,' Ronick said.

They left Aerospace Main in a runner Ronick commandeered using his police credentials. After some discussion Keefer and Leela got their way and a detour was made to the launch-and-recovery crash zone to collect the duelling handgun Keefer had buried there. The Doctor was slightly irritated that Leela's attachment to her knife was made to seem less irrational because Keefer had a similar attitude to his gun, but under the circumstances it would have been churlish to object too strongly.

'There is no appeal against an open contract,' Keefer said. 'We're dead as yesterday and you know it.' He was walking

through the firebreaks while his wrist unit processed and located the pre-set coordinates, but it was taking too much time.

‘How much further?’ the Doctor asked. Sita had given them an estimate of the response times of Aerospace Main Security and he was conscious that they were getting close to the point when the first gun-ship would be scrambled.

‘This is it,’ Keefer said, and knelt down and began to dig. When he came up with nothing he said, ‘It should be here.’

The Doctor wasn’t really surprised. ‘Come on,’ he said. It was as he expected. ‘Time to go.’

‘This is where I buried it.’ Keefer dug around more determinedly. ‘It has to be here.’

‘It won’t be,’ the Doctor said.

Keefer waggled his wrist. ‘This may not be the most expensive on the market but it does the job.’

‘I’m sure it does,’ the Doctor said. ‘I’m sure this is the right spot. And I’m sure the gun will turn up. Just not here.’ Whoever they were, they were more than one step ahead yet again.

Keefer stared up at him. ‘What is it you know?’

The Doctor turned and strode away. ‘I know I don’t like getting shot at,’ he said without looking back, ‘and unless we leave now that is what’s going to happen.’

The Doctor’s New Way training compound looked as deserted as it had the last time, only this time it really was empty. They parked the runner out of sight and while the others were checking everywhere else, the Doctor went to his office. It had been stripped bare. The TARDIS had gone along with everything else. It was really no more than he expected. Was it just random looting, he wondered? And without money and influence how was he going to find it? He stuck his hands in his pockets and sighed a deep sigh. He had thought there was a short cut out of all this but now it seemed...

‘Where is the TARDIS?’ Leela asked behind him.

‘Don’t tell me you’re finally ready to leave,’ he said.

Leela shrugged noncommittally. ‘How will we find it?’

For a black moment the Doctor had no idea and was tempted to say so. Instead he smiled and said. 'I shall have to talk to some old friends.'

'You haven't got any scuffling friends any more, old or otherwise,' Ronick said. They were sitting in what had been the locker rooms. It was the only place left that had seats, possibly because it was the only place where they had been bolted down. He scowled at Keefer. 'Tell him what an open contract is.'

'He's an agent. He knows what an open contract is.'

'If he's any sort of agent at all,' Sita said, 'he's not that sort of agent. Tell him what an open contract is.'

'I know what an open contract is,' the Doctor said. 'Anyone can kill you at any time using anything that comes to hand. Civilisation at its finest.'

'You can say it,' Ronick said, either not noticing or deliberately ignoring the sarcasm. 'But do you understand it?'

'I understand that Keefer, Leela and I have been sentenced to death in absentia and in something of a rush. First question: why us three and not you two? We've all been involved in whatever this has been about.' He saw Ronick's expression darkening. 'I'll tell you why,' he went on, heading off a confrontation he was not yet ready for. 'It's because we three are the ones who are directly involved in the noble contest.'

'That makes no sense,' Ronick said flatly. 'Why do it that way? Dead is dead, and there are easier ways to get you dead.'

Sita said, 'Actually, as far as the system is concerned, I'm already dead.'

Which left Ronick as the odd one out again, the Doctor thought. How many variations on that theme would it take before it bothered someone enough to mention it? The answer was immediate.

‘So I’m the only one left alive then,’ Ronick said, his eyes disappearing behind a smile. ‘I must have been doing something right.’

As an attempt to divert suspicion it was an obvious failure. The others were suddenly looking at Ronick with varying degrees of unease and hostility. The Doctor gave up on the idea of postponing the confrontation. ‘What you’ve been doing,’ he said, ‘is keeping it all moving. Keeping us all moving.’

Ronick gave a small shrug. ‘I’m one of nature’s facilitators.’

‘Which is why you were picked and it’s what you were paid for isn’t it?’ the Doctor said and watched Ronick’s smile squeeze into a narrow scowl.

‘Paid for?’ Sita said. ‘Are you saying he sold us out? You sold us out?’ She looked ready to kill Ronick with her bare hands. ‘I trusted you.’

‘No you didn’t,’ Ronick said. ‘One word from him? This is what you think of as trust?’

‘You bastard.’

‘What am I supposed to have done apart from saving your life, and his?’

‘He did save your life,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘Mine too.’

‘Don’t bother to thank me,’ Ronick said, ‘it was a mistake. One of my many mistakes.’

‘Yes,’ the Doctor said, ‘you did make a number of them. Small things. Nothing conclusive. Circumstantial evidence of corruption.’

Ronick shook his head in disbelief. ‘You’re guessing aren’t you? Hold your nose and hope. You can’t prove a scuffling thing.’

Leela drew her knife. ‘What do you want to do with this traitor?’

‘Kill me, what else can you do?’

‘It’s got my vote,’ Sita said.

‘Are you going to do it?’ Ronick scoffed at her. ‘Thought not. You people are a laugh riot.’

‘I’ll challenge you if that’s what you want,’ Keefer said and offered him the sheathed hakai-warrior’s sabre he was carrying. ‘You can use this.’

‘And what are you going to use?’ Ronick asked, making no move to accept the weapon or the challenge.

Keefer smiled thinly. ‘I think one between the two of us should be enough, don’t you?’

‘Stop it,’ the Doctor said, giving his irritation full rein. ‘We haven’t got time for that nonsense. We have to think our way out of this situation and threatening each other doesn’t help.’

‘You are going to let him stay with us,’ Leela said. ‘After he has betrayed us?’

Truthfully the Doctor couldn’t think of any alternative. ‘He’s been on our side most of the time, certainly since he finished doing what he was paid to do. That’s true isn’t it, Sergeant Ronick?’

‘If you say so.’

Leela sheathed her knife, ‘If he lets us down I will deal with him.’

‘Don’t push it girly,’ Ronick snorted. ‘Aren’t we forgetting that one of us is a policeman and everyone else here is dead?’

Whatever else he is, the Doctor thought, he isn’t a coward. ‘I’ll challenge you if that’s what you want? It wasn’t what he wanted. The duelling culture meant nothing to him. It wasn’t a sacred rite, it wasn’t a noble contest, it wasn’t even important. In Ronick’s world killing was crime. In Keefer’s world rules made it acceptable. The two worlds were bound to collide. I’ll challenge you if that’s what you want. And suddenly the Doctor thought he saw a way out. ‘The arena,’ he said. ‘That’s the sacred heart of the noble contest. Whatever happens there matters to everyone.’

‘Not everyone,’ Sita said.

‘I hoped I’d fight there one day,’ Keefer said. ‘It’s every fighter’s dream.’

‘I’ve been told you should always be careful what you wish for,’ the Doctor said.

‘You have a plan, Doctor,’ Leela said. ‘I can tell by your face that you have a plan.’

He nodded. I have a plan, he thought. The question is how much of it is *my* plan. 'We must stage a duel in the arena,' he said, 'in front of a very select and very influential audience.' He smiled at Ronick. 'I think you can handle the invitations. You and Sita between you.'

'Why should I do that?' Ronick said. 'Remind me again: why should I give a scuff?'

'Laws have been broken,' the Doctor said. 'Doesn't your ID say something about being a law officer?'

Ronick thought for a moment and then said, 'I take it these two,' he jerked a thumb between Leela and Keefer, 'will be fighting this duel?'

'It's what our guests will want. It's what they'll come for.'

'You do understand,' Ronick said, 'that your average VIP doesn't like to be made a fool of.'

'That bothers you?' Sita asked. 'You're full of surprises, Driftblubber. But then again perhaps you're not.'

Ronick looked bored. 'The point I'm making is that if there is a fight it will have to be a fight to the death or none of us will get out of this alive.'

'It won't come to that,' the Doctor said, sounding more confident than he felt. 'Not if everything goes according to plan. And it will. But whatever happens Leela, I want you to promise me that you will not fight.'

Plans go wrong, complicated plans go wrong complicatedly, simple plans simply go wrong, Leela thought, and something had gone wrong. Where was the Doctor?

Around the bloodstained arena fence the tiny lenses glittered and waited. She and Keefer stood side by side. Keefer was examining a handgun he had found in the centre of the fight ground. 'It is mine,' he said quietly. 'It's been cleaned and oiled but it's mine all right. The Doctor said it would turn up. How did they find it?'

'You said they always knew you were coming,' Leela said. 'If they knew you were coming then they knew where you had been.'

'Are we that powerless?' he murmured. 'No choices at all?'

Leela looked across at the tunnel entrance. She half expected to see security men running in to stop them violating this place that was thought of as sacred. They had no more right to be here than she and the Doctor had had before. But this time there were no security men. This time there was no senior umpire. 'We choose not to fight,' she said.

'No,' Keefer said flatly. 'We can't do that. We should leave.'
'The Doctor said to wait.'

'We can't just stand around in here. This is the theatre of dreams.'

'This is nothing more than a patch of ground where people kill each other,' Leela said.

Keefer looked horrified. 'You can't say that. Show some respect. Great fighters have died here.'

'Why?' Leela asked. 'Why have they died here?'

'You know why.' Keefer was getting angry.

'I know a warrior does not fight for the pleasure of others.' Leela strode to the arena fence and pointed at the stains. 'I know these are not sacred death marks.' She rubbed her finger across one.

'Don't do that!' Keefer almost shouted.

Leela said, 'It is dried blood.' She touched another. 'Death is not sacred.' She strode round the arena occasionally slapping her hand against the fence. 'Blood,' she said. 'Blood. Nothing but dried blood.'

Keefer watched her in tense silence.

In the tri-dee viewing suite, at the top of the arena, the Doctor watched the two young fighters on one of the main screens. 'She is remarkable isn't she?' he said. 'I knew her when she was nothing more than a superstitious savage. Now look at her. She thinks, she reasons, she understands.'

'Is she going to fight or not?' the State Security Minister asked.

'She does seem reluctant,' the Enforcer of the Guild of Agents said. 'I assume from the size of the purse that there is not going to be any sort of hitch at this late stage.'

There was a murmur of agreement from the other dozen or so people who were present in the suite.

‘The fight will begin when Hakai says it will begin,’ the Doctor said, hoping that he’d pitched the flattery right and that the vain old woman would want to make the others wait. ‘This is her project.’

‘It is the last match of the day,’ she said. ‘I want them to be spontaneous.’

The Doctor said, ‘I suppose when you’ve planned every detail up to now, spontaneity would be the final triumph. I am right in thinking you did plan every detail up to now?’

‘What is it you want to ask me?’ she said without looking at him. ‘Speak up, Doctor, stop wasting time.’

The Doctor was surprised by her directness. He had thought he would have to draw her out gradually, perhaps trick her into a confession. But if directness was what she wanted... ‘Why *did* you send the android to kill Keefer?’

Hakai continued to stare at the screen. ‘He is the remarkable one,’ she said.

‘Believe it or not it was a trial run,’ the Enforcer said, matter-of-factly. ‘Keefer was picked because he was promising: a strong fighter who was good enough to be a genuine test but not too famous and with a small-time agent. We had to adjust death records and so on without drawing unwanted attention.’

This wasn’t what the Doctor expected. He looked around at the others. Nobody was shocked. His plan seemed to be going spectacularly wrong. This wasn’t just about Hakai. This was some sort of a conspiracy.

‘You may have noticed there were other high-profile deaths around that time,’ the Enforcer went on. ‘Most of them were as they appeared to be. But there were two other androids being tested. Both of them were successful.’

‘The red-headed woman who killed Baloch?’ the Doctor suggested.

‘And Maidenly. And there was one that killed Starvil.’

‘Only Keefer has prevailed,’ Hakai said.

The Doctor was puzzled. 'I don't understand why you've done what you've done.'

The minister stood up. 'We've decided this is over,' he said. 'The system has to be changed. We cannot have all this killing any longer. It has got to stop. We have to move on.'

'If that's a campaign speech,' the Doctor said, 'I think it needs work.' He could almost have laughed. It was almost funny. 'What you're saying is: you're killing everyone involved in order to stop the killing? You do know that's insane don't you?'

'We are undermining, sidelining and ultimately destroying duelling and all it represents. That isn't mad,' the Enforcer said. 'That's progress.'

What do you give someone who has everything, the Doctor suddenly thought, looking at Hakai. 'How many of you are there in this psychotic conspiracy?' he asked. You give them a faith, something to believe in.

The minister smiled. 'You have to keep a conspiracy small,' he said wryly, 'otherwise it's a political movement. Actually most of us are here.' He glanced around. 'Actually all of us are here I think.' He looked uncertain for a moment. 'You managed to invite everyone involved. How did that happen?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'Lucky coincidence I imagine.' How *did* that happen he wondered? 'I suggested a couple of people. Sergeant Ronick invited the rest.'

'Be quiet,' Hakai commanded, staring obsessively at the screen. 'They are going to fight.' Her voice was thick and slurred with excitement.

The Doctor looked at the screen. He saw Keefer square up to Leela. They were going to fight. 'They most certainly are not going to fight,' he said, heading for the exit. Hakai clicked her fingers and two heavy-set security men appeared in the doorway and grabbed him and threw him to the floor.

'Enough!' Keefer raged. 'You will not defile this place any more! We fight. I name and claim the ground. Right here, right now.'

'No,' Leela said.

‘You cannot refuse my challenge.’

‘I can refuse it. I have refused it.’

Keefer raised the handgun. ‘I must kill you either way. Fight me or die.’

Leela stared at the gun. She could not stop looking at it. She could see death was a moment away. The Doctor had said no matter what they must not fight. She had given him her promise. So had Keefer. She forced herself to raise her eyes to his face. It was expressionless. His eyes were as blank as the watching lenses all around them. He was waiting for her to make a move. He was waiting to kill her.

The Doctor struggled to free himself from the security men and get up from the floor. He couldn’t see a screen any longer. He couldn’t see what was happening. He hadn’t planned to leave Leela and Keefer down there in the arena for so long. He hadn’t planned for Leela to challenge Keefer’s beliefs like that. He hadn’t planned very much of this at all.

Then he heard the shot, it sounded deafeningly close, and he heard the gasps of excitement from the suite behind him. Leela had no gun. It was Keefer who had the gun. ‘Let me up,’ he demanded. ‘Let me up.’ Without a word the two security men released him and he rushed back to look at the main screen, only to find that it was no longer showing the scene on the arena floor but was showing the tri-dee suite itself. Security men were filing in and it appeared everyone was being arrested.

The Senior Umpire and High Referee of Duel, his grey uniform spattered with blood, was standing over the body of Hakai with a smoking gun still in his hand. ‘Nobody takes the Rules of Attack into their own hands,’ he said solemnly. The Doctor thought he must be talking to himself but then he realised he was talking to several tri-dee cameras. ‘The Lady Hakai’s co-conspirators will be taken into the custody of the Court of Attack. This matter is at an end.’

Once the main screen had returned to showing the arena floor where Leela and Keefer were standing with their backs to one another, the High Referee nodded at the Doctor and

said, 'It's not at an end of course. After what you've done there can only be chaos.'

'After what I've done?' the Doctor said.

'I assume your plan was to unmask the Lady Hakai to this little group, who were then supposed to deal with her?' He indicated the camera. 'I..' He waved his hand vaguely. 'I played your little drama to more people.'

'You broadcast what happened.'

'And now they know the death records can be tampered with, the interrogation computers are not reliable, there are machines masquerading as fighters.'

'Was Ronick working for you all along?' the Doctor asked.

'Clever policeman, Ronick,' the High Referee said. 'Very clever. If it wasn't for the fact that he's fat, greedy and corrupt, you wouldn't be able to trust him at all.'

On the main screen the Doctor could see that Keefer was fiddling with his gun and Leela had her hand on the hilt of her knife. 'My fighters,' he said.

The High Referee looked at the screen. 'What about them?'

'There are open contracts on them.'

'Cancelled. Yours too.'

'Would you mind telling them that?'

The High Referee flicked a switch and said, 'Nobody move!' On the screen Leela and Keefer both looked up. 'I'm coming to sort this out.'

'That's more or less where we came in,' the Doctor said.

'It seems ungrateful,' Leela said. 'That is all I am saying.'

'It's not ungrateful,' the Doctor said, happy to feel the sound of the TARDIS whispering like a shiver across his skin. 'There is no other way to leave.' He closed his eyes and breathed in the rasping murmur as it rose and fell. 'This is the way I do it. This is the way I have always done it. As far as I remember this is the way I always will do it.'

Leela took out a whetstone and began to work on her knife. 'Benron and the others were pleased when they got your office back to how it had been.'

'So was I,' the Doctor said. And I did say thank you.'

‘And then you put a complete stranger in charge of the fight school.’

‘He wasn’t a complete stranger.’ The Doctor smiled. ‘You just didn’t like Keefer.’

‘He did not think as the fighters in the school thought. He was not the same as them.’

‘I imagine that’s why Benron suggested him.’

Leela looked up from the knife. Her expression was sceptical. ‘Benron suggested him?’

He said everyone could learn a lot from Keefer and that his late father would have approved of the appointment.’

Leela snorted and went back to working on the knife. ‘And then,’ she said after a moment, ‘we take the big decorative box and disappear.’

‘Here today and gone tomorrow,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘Or should that be here tomorrow and gone today.’ He shrugged. ‘Whichever.’ He was pleased to be finished with that world, he was pleased to be back in the TARDIS, he was just generally pleased. ‘Tell me something,’ he said. ‘What stopped you and Keefer from fighting in the arena? He did challenge you.’

‘I had given you my word.’

‘I’m impressed,’ the Doctor said. ‘There was a lot of pressure.’

Leela smiled, ‘It was never a real match, was it,’ she said.

‘No?’

Leela shook her head. ‘Only a fool would use a knife against a gun in that sort of duel,’ she said. ‘I am a warrior not a fool.’

The Doctor smiled. ‘You’re certainly not a fool,’ he said. ‘Except where that knife is concerned. I know: how would you like to learn to play chess?’

‘What is chess?’

‘It’s a very violent war game,’ the Doctor said encouragingly. ‘A game for warriors. But you don’t need a knife. Or a gun.’

‘What do you use?’

‘The most powerful and dangerous weapon of all.’

‘Is this one of your puzzles?’ Leela said and sighed. ‘What is the most powerful and dangerous weapon of all? How many guesses do I have?’

‘You should only need one,’ the Doctor said, ‘otherwise it isn’t.’ And he wandered off to look for the chess set.

About the Author

CHRIS BOUCHER is a respected writer of both novels and television drama. He wrote three highly popular scripts for Tom Baker's incarnation of *Doctor Who* - The Face of Evil, The Robots of Death, and Image of the Fendahl - and has continued the Doctor and Leela's developing relationship in his novels for BBC Books.

Chris is also well known to genre experts as the script editor of every episode of *Blake's 7* and author of many of the most popular episodes of that series. As well as working on BBC drama series like *Bergerac*, he created *Star Cops*, which has just been released on DVD.